HER MAJESTY’S GOVERNMENT

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

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9 October 2018
Mr Speaker: Now that the Chief Coroner has published the conclusions of the inquest, I know that the whole House will want me to say again how deeply grateful we are to PC Keith Palmer, the courageous police officer who was killed on 22 March 2017 doing the job he loved: keeping Parliament and us safe. Everyone who works here was shocked and saddened by his death, and we continue to express our heartfelt condolences to his family and friends.

As we reflect upon the findings of the inquest, we pay tribute to PC Palmer and to those whose lives were lost on Westminster bridge. We need to take all possible action to prevent a similar tragedy in the future. Carriage Gates are now kept closed and opened only to allow vehicles in or out. The Parliamentary Security Department and the Metropolitan Police continue to work hard to protect us from danger, but our co-operation is required, too. In that light, I encourage all Members to wear their security pass when on the estate. We should remember that security in Westminster is everyone’s responsibility.

Yvonne Fovargue: I, too, met the family of Jerome Rogers, and I pay tribute to them for their courage in taking the campaign forward. However, Jerome’s case perfectly highlights why the industry needs regulating, because his problems were just the tip of an iceberg. Citizens Advice helped 41,000 people with 90,000 bailiff issues last year—one person every three minutes. The call for evidence relates to rogue bailiffs, but this is not just about one or two wayward individuals; the whole system is rotten. Will the Minister consider the need for an independent body to regulate and police the industry properly?
Lucy Frazer: The hon. Lady makes some important points. Officials in my Department recently met with Citizens Advice, StepChange, the Money Advice Trust and AdviceUK to discuss such issues. Last month, they also met the Certificated Enforcement Agents Association. I have met Peter Tutton, the head of policy at StepChange, and he made a statement similar to the hon. Lady’s about the need for independent regulation. We will be putting forward a call for evidence and questions will be asked on a variety of issues.

Kevin Foster (Torbay) (Con): There will always be difficulties when debts are pursued, particularly when people may genuinely be struggling to pay them. As for the call for evidence, how will the Minister be working with local authorities, which obviously engage bailiffs to enforce council tax debt against those who may be struggling most to pay off such debt?

Lucy Frazer: As my hon. Friend highlights, council tax debt is an important area in which we must ensure that bailiffs and enforcement agents are operating appropriately, and we will be looking at the enforcement work that bailiffs do.

Dr David Drew (Stroud) (Lab/Co-op): Will the Minister call for accurate statistics as part of the review? It is difficult to get to the facts in this area, including the number of people who are suffering because of bailiffs, so will she look into that as a matter of urgency?

Lucy Frazer: Of course, evidence is extremely important. I should mention that when we reviewed the legislation earlier this year, we found that not all bailiffs act appropriately. A large number act in accordance with the regulations that we set out, but we need to look at the small number who do not.

Chris Bryant (Rhondda) (Lab): But it is like the wild west at the moment, and often there is no redress when the bailiffs have made a mistake. I have one case in which a family lost their property because the bailiffs went to Treorchy instead of Treherbert. Three years later, the police will not investigate and there is no body to which the family can go to get their place back. It is surely time that we acted instead of having yet more consultation.

Lucy Frazer: I would be very interested to hear about the case that the hon. Gentleman mentions. There is regulation in relation to bailiffs. For example, they have to be appointed by the court every two years. They come to the court to get their authorisation. So measures are in place to protect people, but we are looking at the issue and we must go further.

Private Prosecutions

2. Andrew Rosindell (Romford) (Con): How many private prosecutions initiated by third parties (a) were brought to trial and (b) resulted in a conviction in the last five years.

3. Stephen Crabb (Preseli Pembrokeshire) (Con): What steps the Government are taking to help offenders find employment immediately after they leave prison.

15. James Heappey (Wells) (Con): What steps the Government are taking to help offenders find employment immediately after they leave prison.

16. Nigel Huddleston (Mid Worcestershire) (Con): What steps the Government are taking to help offenders find employment immediately after they leave prison.

The Lord Chancellor and Secretary of State for Justice

Mr Gauke: My right hon. Friend is right to raise the point. My hon. Friend the Member for Monmouth (David T. C. Davies) has also raised that point on the Floor of the House, and we are working on proposals to do precisely that. Getting offenders into work makes them less likely to reoffend and enables them to contribute to society. It is something that we should absolutely aspire to.

James Heappey: Despite progress in some prisons, too many prisoners still leave custody without a bank account, which is liable to increase the incidence of reoffending. As part of the ongoing review of probation...
services, will the Secretary of State look at what more could be done in prisons to ensure that this most basic of facilities is held by all prisoners before they are released?

Mr Gauke: My hon. Friend raises an important point. It is worth pointing out that the offender banking programme ensures that prisons that release a significant number of prisoners have a relationship with a commercial bank to enable prisoners to open a basic bank account in the last six months of their sentence. A record number of accounts—6,500—were opened in 2017. He is right to highlight the matter.

Nigel Huddleston: The Right Course is a programme set up by celebrity maître d’ Fred Sirieix, which helps train prisoners to run prison restaurants and therefore qualify for jobs once they have left prison. Will the Minister meet me and Fred to discuss how similar programmes can be expanded?

Mr Gauke: I will be very happy to do so. It is an important point. I am pleased to hear about the work that Fred Sirieix is undertaking, and I will be happy to meet with him.

Seema Malhotra (Feltham and Heston) (Lab/Co-op): The Secretary of State is correct to say that it is through employment that we often have the best chance to reduce and stop reoffending. What discussions has he had with his counterpart in the Department for Business, Energy and Industrial Strategy about mainstreaming incentives to employee ex-offenders in apprenticeship and internship strategies?

Mr Gauke: We work across government on this matter and are considering a number of proposals across government, including with BEIS, on how we can encourage employers in this area, including on apprenticeships. Let me make a point I have made before: employers are increasingly looking at employing ex-offenders. We should all welcome that, and I would be supportive of any constructive steps to progress this.

David Hanson (Delyn) (Lab): The biggest employer in Britain today is the Secretary of State and other Ministers, through themselves in their Departments and through the suppliers that they use. What steps has he taken to improve employment opportunities for offenders within his remit?

Mr Gauke: That is a good point. One thing we announced when I launched the education and employment strategy was the fact that the public sector—the civil service—was taking people on. We had a pilot in the north-west of England, which we are now extending to other parts of the United Kingdom. The Prison Service also takes on ex-offenders. The right hon. Gentleman is right to highlight this, and the public sector has a role to play in the area, too.

Jenny Chapman (Darlington) (Lab): Five years ago, the Government sold off half the probation service, giving the justification that “through the gate” services would be improved. That aim has not been met by that project, and neither have any of the other aims described at the time. Is it not time to bring probation back together?

Mr Gauke: The reoffending rate has actually fallen since then, but we recognise that issues need to be addressed. That is why earlier this year I announced a series of reforms to the probation system, including spending an additional £22 million on “through the gate” services to address this specific point.

Robert Neill (Bromley and Chislehurst) (Con): One problem with “through the gate” is not who delivers it, but the fact that too often the interventions start so late on in the prisoner’s career. If six months is appropriate in terms of opening bank accounts—sensibly, it is—is it not sensible that resettlement interviews and work should be started at least at that time, if not earlier, rather than at 12 weeks or so, as we currently have it?

Mr Gauke: My hon. Friend, the Chairman of the Select Committee on Justice, raises an interesting point. The point I make to him is that we need to make sure that this system is working. There is scope for improvement, and, as I say, we have announced additional expenditure in this area, but he is right to say that this is not about who does it, but how it is done. There are steps we can take to improve it.

Imran Hussain (Bradford East) (Lab): Prison officers play a vital role in equipping offenders for their release, including by helping them prepare for work or education on the outside. In his speech to the Tory party conference, the Justice Secretary committed to recruiting more prison officers to fill the huge gap created by his Government’s austerity cuts. So can he guarantee that by the end of this Parliament there will be the same number of frontline officers in our prisons as there were in 2010?

Mr Gauke: What I can guarantee is that we are increasing the numbers—they have gone up by 3,500 in the past two years. That is enabling us to implement a key worker strategy, so that prison officers have the ability to spend more time with prisoners and can build that personal relationship, providing the support and advice necessary. That is an important step forward and I am pleased we are able to do it.

Probation Services

4. Alex Cunningham (Stockton North) (Lab): If he will take steps to return all probation services to the public sector.

The Minister of State, Ministry of Justice (Rory Stewart): We do not believe this is an ideological divide between the private and public sectors. We are looking at the relationship between the community rehabilitation companies and the national probation service, in terms of their geographical spread and how they work together. However, we are finding across the country that having the public sector focus on the highest risk prisoners and the private sector and other, non-profit actors focusing on delivering for the lowest risk offenders is delivering innovation, from Cumbria right the way down to London.
Alex Cunningham: In the Committee on the Bill that created the service we have today, many weeks were spent trying to convince the Government that their privatisation experiment with the probation service would fail, and it has. The exception might be the only not-for-profit public sector CRC, which covers the Tees Valley, part of which I represent. It has been singled out in Her Majesty’s inspectorate of probation reports as delivering best practice. What will the Minister do to ensure that the Tees Valley CRC is not subsumed into another privatised contract, to learn from it, and to return the probation service to the public sector?

Rory Stewart: I pay tribute to the hon. Gentleman’s local CRC, which is a good example of how CRCs can work. Durham CRC is a good example of the local authority and the previous probation trust working together. It has met 85% of its targets and is a well-performing CRC. There are also good examples to be followed elsewhere in the country, including in Cumbria, where the CRC is working with rural communities, and in London, where the CRC has improved dramatically and done some very good work with Grenfell survivors. I certainly pay tribute to the work done in the hon. Gentleman’s constituency.

Andrew Bridgen (North West Leicestershire) (Con): Does the Minister agree that one key to aiding the rehabilitation of offenders is to ensure that probation officers have manageable case loads, so that they can give sufficient time and energy to each case?

Rory Stewart: A manageable case load is of course absolutely central, as is the flexibility to make sure that when a probation officer has a high-risk offender—a criminal who is more challenging to deal with—they have smaller numbers of offenders to deal with and can adjust their case load according to the risk posed by the individual and the complexity of the case.

Catherine West (Hornsey and Wood Green) (Lab): What assessment has the Minister made of NHS and non-NHS-provided drug-curing services? The drug problems seem to be getting worse, rather than better, in so many of our prisons.

Rory Stewart: This is a serious issue, not only in England but in the devolved Administrations such as Scotland, where I saw very high levels of methadone prescription. I am happy to sit down with the hon. Lady to discuss the subject in more detail.

Robert Courts (Witney) (Con): What assurances can the Minister provide that the services provided by community rehabilitation companies are robustly monitored?

Rory Stewart: The best guarantee that these companies are performing is the action of Parliament and of the chief inspector of probation, to whom I pay tribute for her series of hard-hitting reports, most recently on domestic violence. As the Secretary of State has pointed out, we have seen a 2% reduction in reoffending. That has been driven by these companies and is to be welcomed, but there is of course much more to be done to protect the public.

Sentences: Reoffending Reduction

5. Chris Elmore (Ogmore) (Lab): What assessment his Department has made of the effectiveness of sentences of less than three months in reducing reoffending.

18. Jeff Smith (Manchester, Withington) (Lab): What assessment his Department has made of the effectiveness of sentences of less than three months in reducing reoffending.

19. Vicky Foxcroft (Lewisham, Deptford) (Lab): What assessment his Department has made of the effectiveness of sentences of less than 12 months in reducing reoffending.

21. Ellie Reeves (Lewisham West and Penge) (Lab): What assessment his Department has made of the effectiveness of sentences of less than 12 months in reducing reoffending.

The Lord Chancellor and Secretary of State for Justice (Mr David Gauke): As I have said recently, there is persuasive evidence that short custodial sentences do not work in terms of rehabilitation. In certain circumstances, community sentences are more effective in the reduction of reoffending and therefore keeping the public safe. The reoffending rate of offenders who serve fewer than 12 months is around 65%, but earlier research has shown the reoffending rate for similar offenders who receive a community penalty to be lower. We will look at what more we can do to emphasise that short custodial sentences should be viewed as a last resort.

Chris Elmore: The Secretary of State may be aware that the rate of women reoffending and being recalled to prison is higher than that of men, with three out of every five women offenders being recalled or re-prosecuted and sent back to prison. There is now a real need to implement the female offender strategy and ensure that women are given as much support as they can be given. There is also a real need for the Secretary of State to take action on short-term offences and look into other ways to sentence women, because the current approach simply is not working.

Mr Gauke: I thank the hon. Gentleman for his remarks. He referred to the female offender strategy; as he will be aware, its focus is on alternatives to custody, particularly for minor offences. There are particular issues for females offenders in respect of the nature of the offences and the issues that female offenders face, so it is right that we implement the new strategy.

Jeff Smith: Over the past five years, the use of community sentences has declined, and it has declined fastest for theft and drugs offences. Does the Secretary of State think that prison is the best place for people with drug addictions and shoplifting convictions? If not, how is he going to reverse that trend?

Mr Gauke: Often, it is not the right place, which is why my hon. Friend the Prisons Minister and I have been clear that we need to consider alternatives to custody and explore what more we can do with community sentences. In some cases, the issue is getting to the heart
of the problem, which often might be drug dependency and so on. Some encouraging pilots are ongoing in respect of community sentence treatment requirements. Those are some of the steps that we are taking. I welcome the hon. Gentleman’s support for our approach.

**Vicky Foxcroft**: Short-term sentences are catastrophic for reoffending rates, and if the Government are serious about reducing both crime and our prison population they must recognise the importance of early intervention. With the Home Office now pursuing a public health approach to violent crime, will the Minister tell us how he is engaging with this strategy?

**Mr Gauke**: We are very much engaging with the strategy, and it is a strategy that I support. We are ensuring that we work across government to intervene as early as we can and that we have strong alternatives to custody that are not soft options but are effective. I draw the hon. Lady’s attention to the work that we are doing on community sentence treatment requirements as a way in which we can work across government to address some of these issues. For some people, prison is the right place, but for many of the petty offenders, there are more effective things we can do, and I welcome her support for the approach we are taking.

**Ellie Reeves**: The Justice Committee report on transforming rehabilitation recommended a presumption against short sentences. Statistics show that the reoffending rate for women prisoners currently stands at 61% for those serving sentences of less than 12 months, yet, since 2010, community sentences for women have nearly halved. Will the Secretary of State therefore fully commit to the Committee’s recommendations and implement a presumption against sentences of less than 12 months?

**Mr Gauke**: We are looking at various options in this context. I know that Scotland introduced a presumption against three months. I think it is fair to say that that did not make much of a difference, and it has now been extended to 12 months, and we are looking at the evidence from that. I hope it is very clear to the House that when it comes to reducing reoffending and to rehabilitation, we do question the effectiveness of short sentences.

**Andrew Selous** (South West Bedfordshire) (Con): Would not the effectiveness of all custodial sentences be increased if we reduced the number of prisoners who were released on a Friday night when no public services are available for them, often leaving them to fall into the hands of the local drug dealer and go straight back into a life of crime?

**Mr Gauke**: My hon. Friend is right to raise that concern. There are different ways in which one can address that matter. More support could be provided. For example, there could be release on a temporary licence a few days before the final release so that many of the public services can be accessed. Whether we look at release on a particular day or at other ways of addressing that matter, I completely understand his point. We need to make sure that when people are released, they are in a strong position to access accommodation and a job and to be able to maintain their family links; that is what we want to do.

**Philip Davies** (Shipley) (Con): The figures from the Ministry of Justice consistently show that the longer people spend in prison the less likely they are to reoffend. When the Secretary of State says that he wants to see the end of short-term sentences, does he agree with me that those people should be sent to prison for longer, or does he agree with the Opposition that those criminals should not be sent to prison at all?

**Mr Gauke**: I had a feeling that the consensus was not going to last much longer. The reality is that for petty offenders who tend to be prolific and tend to be repeat offenders, the evidence shows that non-custodial sentences are more effective at reducing reoffending than custodial sentences and that is the approach that we want to take.

**Mr Philip Hollobone** (Kettering) (Con): Would not reoffending rates for those on short-term prison sentences go down if life was made as uncomfortable as possible for them while they were in jail? Instead of spending all day in their overcrowded prison cell either on their mobile phone or going through the satellite TV channels, should they not be out breaking rocks in a quarry or picking up litter in the rain?

**Mr Gauke**: People are sent to prison as punishment, not for punishment. The purpose of prison should be about ensuring that when people are released, they are less likely to reoffend. I do not think that my hon. Friend is setting out an effective approach.

**Julian Knight** (Solihull) (Con): I support the idea that short custodial sentences often serve little purpose in reducing reoffending, but does the Secretary of State agree that to convince the public of this—to take them on this journey—they need to see both transparency of sentencing and that any discounts on tariffs are rewards, rather than the rule?

**Mr Gauke**: It is important that there are incentives—both carrots and sticks—in the prison system. Good behaviour in prison should be rewarded, just as bad behaviour should be punished. That is the approach that we need to take.

**Stuart C. McDonald** (Cumbernauld, Kilsyth and Kirkintilloch East) (SNP): My party agrees with the Secretary of State regarding the evidence on the inappropriateness of many short-term prison sentences, but community sentences need to be properly resourced to ensure that they work as an appropriate alternative. Will the Government increase funding to local authorities for the delivery of effective community sentences alongside any presumption?

**Mr Gauke**: We need to make sure that the alternatives to custody are effective—that they are not soft options, but that they do enable people to turn their lives around—and that the public have confidence that this is the proper course of action to take. That is our ambition.

**Sport and Recidivism**

6. **John Lamont** (Berwickshire, Roxburgh and Selkirk) (Con): What assessment has he made of the potential role of sport in reducing recidivism.}
The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Justice (Edward Argar): I recognise the value of sport and physical activity for the physical and mental health benefits they bring, and for the role that they can play in encouraging positive behaviours among offenders. That is one of the main reasons that the Ministry of Justice commissioned Professor Rosie Meek’s review of sport in prisons, which published its recommendations this summer and to which I have responded.

John Lamont: The impact that sport can have is highlighted by the incredible story of John McAvoy, who discovered a talent for endurance sport while in prison serving a long sentence, and who is now a world record holder and a professional triathlete. Although not every offender will go on to complete an Ironman, sport can greatly reduce reoffending rates. What consideration has been given to improving the opportunity for offenders to participate in sport while in prison, and to encourage people such as John McAvoy to share his experience by speaking to offenders?

Edward Argar: My hon. Friend is absolutely right. John McAvoy’s story is an important one, and he helped to play an important role in promoting sport in our custodial estate. On my recent visit to HMYOI Wetherby, its impressive governor Andrew Dickinson set out the work that he is doing with local sports clubs such as Leeds Rhinos to provide important role models in that institution. Sport and programmes such as these can help to develop attitudes and skills such as discipline and teamwork that are valuable in making a success of life outside custody and in reducing reoffending.

Jim Shannon (Strangford) (DUP): With more over-60s in our prisons than under-21s, and claims that provision for women and girls is being underdeveloped, will the Minister outline whether he believes that a holistic approach for sports programmes throughout prisons is a realistic approach to prevent reoffending?

Edward Argar: The hon. Gentleman raises an important point about the ageing population in our prisons. The approach that we have adopted—which was set out in Professor Rosie Meek’s report—is designed to provide sport and physical education opportunities for all those in our custodial institutions, regardless of gender or age.

Fiona Bruce (Congleton) (Con): Yesterday I attended the launch at Chester cathedral of an impressive display of artwork by prisoners, the production of which had clearly helped many in their journeys towards personal wholeness. In what other ways can the Ministry of Justice produce an environment that is conducive to good mental health?

Edward Argar: My hon. Friend raises an important point; she has done a lot of work in this area and more broadly around mental health. Sport can play a significant role in addressing mental health issues in prison, but so too can arts, education and other approaches, as she highlights. If she feels that it would be useful, I would be happy to meet her to discuss further her visit and what she took away from it.

Sir Edward Davey (Kingston and Surbiton) (LD): I am glad that the Minister prefers sport to chain gangs, but can he tell the House when the use of sport for prisoner rehabilitation will be the norm, rather than the exception?

Edward Argar: The right hon. Gentleman is right to highlight again the importance of sport. The report published by Professor Meek in the summer, of which we have accepted 53 of the 54 recommendations, sets out a clear direction of travel—that is, alongside education and developing skills, and provisions for mental and physical health, sport plays a key role for prisoners in the rehabilitative process.1

Violence in Prisons

7. Liz Saville Roberts (Dwyfor Meirionnydd) (PC): What comparative assessment he has made of levels of violence in public and private prisons. [906992]

The Lord Chancellor and Secretary of State for Justice (Mr David Gauke): The influx of drugs has had an impact on violence levels in both public and private prisons, which is why we are investing in body scanners, improved searching techniques and phone blocking technology. In 2017, four of the top five assault rates in local prisons and category C prisons were in public prisons.

Liz Saville Roberts: It remains the case that the prisons with the highest number of assaults are all private. In the first quarter of 2018, the top five most violent prisons were privately run. Will the Minister commit to an independent review of violence in private prisons and to a moratorium on any new private prisons in the meantime?

Mr Gauke: No, the reality is that there are issues with violence in both public and private sector prisons. Certainly, the numbers that I have suggest that there is a significant issue in public sector prisons such as Liverpool, Exeter and Bedford, where there have been urgent notifications. We should not take an ideological approach. There are very good private sector prisons, and there are some very good public sector prisons, and it is right that there is a diversity of prisons in our system.

Sir Nicholas Soames (Mid Sussex) (Con): Will my right hon. Friend pay tribute to the prison officers in both public and private prisons who, by and large, do an exceptional job in very, very difficult circumstances? Does he agree that we should on every occasion do what we can to encourage them and raise their status as an important part of the whole process of judicial sentencing?

Mr Gauke: My right hon. Friend is right to make that point, and I happily pay tribute to the work that prison officers do in this country—a point that I made in my party conference speech in Birmingham last week. The work that they do in protecting the public and rehabilitating prisoners should be valued by us all. It is not often very public, because it is, by definition, behind locked doors, but they do excellent work and we should recognise that.

Emma Reynolds (Wolverhampton North East) (Lab): There is a worrying level of violence, and increasing violence, in both state-run and privately run prisons. Does the Secretary of State agree with Phil Taylor, a former governor of Wormwood Scrubs, who said:

“What we’ve got here is a reduction in prison staff by over 10,000, and the government lauding the fact that they replaced it with three and a half thousand inexperience staff who lack confidence and ability to deal with the things that they are confronted with on a daily basis”?

Mr Gauke: It is the case that in the past two years we have increased the prison officer population, and we will continue to do so. That enables us to implement changes, as we have key workers—a point that I made a little earlier—and a relationship is built up between prison officers and prisoners. Alongside additional measures that we have taken to stop, for example, drugs getting in, and the announcement that we have made on PAVA, all of that is designed to assist prison officers in doing a very, very important job.

Richard Drax (South Dorset) (Con): The prison officers in my constituency continue to be worried about the lack of a deterrent to prevent prisoners from assaulting them. Will the Minister reassure the House that far harsher sentences should be handed down to those who dare to assault our prison officers? [Interruption.]

Mr Gauke: Indeed, and as my hon. Friend knows there is a new law that does precisely that. We were very happy to support the private Member’s Bill introduced by the hon. Member for Rhondda (Chris Bryant) on that front. We are increasing legislative ability, and we want to make sure that we work closely with the police to ensure that prosecutions are brought. It is the case, as I have mentioned, that we are giving prison officers a new tool, with access to PAVA.

Richard Burgon (Leeds East) (Lab): The prisons Minister theatrically announced to the press this summer that he would resign if the 10 prisons he had identified did not improve on his watch. I have been looking at the prisons that he chose. It turns out that, of the 10 prisons he identified, only three are in the bottom category of the four prison performance categories. It gets still stranger when we see that there are 15 prisons in that worst performing category. I am sure that the Minister is sincere in his desire to improve prison standards, so instead of cherry-picking prisons for a media stunt, will he agree today that if all the 15 worst performing prisons identified by his own Ministry do not improve on his watch, he will quit?

Mr Gauke: The prisons Minister has set out a plan for 10 prisons that we are going to focus on. If the hon. Gentleman wants an explanation as to why we have chosen those specific 10 prisons, I am happy to meet him, and I know the prisons Minister would be happy to meet him. This is an area where we believe it is necessary to take action, and we have a plan to reduce violence in those prisons. If it works, we can look to extend it elsewhere. The fact is that we are gripping this issue. We are putting measures in place to address it, and we will deliver.

Mobile Phones in Prison

8. Sir Henry Bellingham (North West Norfolk) (Con): The Minister of State, Ministry of Justice (Rory Stewart): There are basically four ways in which we can detect mobile telephones coming into prisons: we can get them at the gate, coming over the wall, in use on the landings and in the cells. We are addressing it in all those ways. We are increasing searching at the gates. We are putting up grilles and netting to stop phones coming over the walls. We are putting dedicated search teams into cells, and we are using equipment to detect phones in use.

Sir Henry Bellingham: I thank the Minister for that helpful reply. He obviously is aware that illegal mobile phones in cells are currently being used for drug trafficking, intimidating witnesses and other criminal activity. Can he make it 100% crystal clear that under no circumstances will he or the Secretary of State ever go down the route of allowing prisoners to have legal mobiles in their cells?

Rory Stewart: We are absolutely clear that a mobile telephone, and particularly a smartphone, in a prison is a form of weapon. It allows a prisoner to jump the prison walls, effectively; they can transfer money, record videos and intimidate witnesses. We are encouraging prisoners to continue to use regulated landlines in prisons to contact their families. We are investing in in-cell telephony, because keeping family relationships will reduce reoffending by 37%, but a mobile telephone is a weapon, and we will find them and remove them.

Ruth Cadbury (Brentford and Isleworth) (Lab): I thank the Minister for that answer. The Justice Committee was told at a recent session that prison governors do not have sufficient flexibility to purchase the equipment they need—particularly the right scanning equipment—and that if they had more flexibility over their budgets, they might be able to invest in that equipment or other things that they feel their prison needs. What is the Minister’s response to that?

Rory Stewart: Thanks to a private Member’s Bill introduced by my hon. Friend the Member for Lewes (Maria Caulfield), which we have been proud to support, new technology is available that should not force governors to have to come up with a bespoke solution prison by prison, but will allow us nationally to have much better technology to identify these phones, listen to them and ultimately seize them.

Employment and Education: Reoffending Reduction

9. James Cartlidge (South Suffolk) (Con): What assessment he has made of the role of employment and education in reducing rates of reoffending. [906995]

The Lord Chancellor and Secretary of State for Justice (Mr David Gauke): Prison education is key to achieving better outcomes for offenders and has been proven to reduce reoffending by approximately 9% and increase P45 employment by 1.8%. We are empowering governors, who will be given the budget and controls to tailor education provision in their prisons, to both better engage their prisoners and meet their specific learning and employment needs. On 17 September, we launched a new innovative commissioning portal, which will give governors direct access to a huge range of learning and skills providers, including local educators and employers.

James Cartlidge: I thank the Secretary of State for that answer. Does he agree that in some cases, self-employment—for example, as a sole trader—may be appropriate? Can he set out whether those new support measures will include mentoring for offenders who want to start a business when they leave prison?
Mr Gauke: My hon. Friend raises an important point. A lot of ex-offenders who go on to work currently do so in self-employment, and that will continue to be the case, so encouragement and support down that route has to be part of what we do to encourage employment.

Dan Jarvis (Barnsley Central) (Lab): The Secretary of State will know that most veterans make a successful transition from the armed forces to civilian life, but inevitably some will end up in the criminal justice system. Will he say what work is taking place to support veterans with employment and training, not only to reduce reoffending but, frankly, to ensure that they do not end up living on the streets?

Mr Gauke: The hon. Gentleman makes a very good point. He will know that there is a strong voluntary sector that provides a huge amount of support. I pay tribute to the work that many of those charities do. We work closely with them because it is particularly important, for those who have served their country, that we do not let them down subsequently.

Court System

10. Kevin Hollinrake (Thirsk and Malton) (Con): What steps the Government are taking to modernise the court system.

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Justice (Lucy Frazer): We are taking a large number of measures to ensure that our court system is brought up to date in the 21st century. For example, we are allowing people to make applications online, with over 50% of divorce petitions now submitted online. We are making better use of technology, so that in some cases vulnerable witnesses can give pre-recorded evidence. We are also allowing those with small claims, up to £10,000, to start their claim online, defend it online and in some cases settle before the case comes to court.

Kevin Hollinrake: Will my hon. and learned Friend consider establishing a financial services tribunal to provide a low-cost dispute resolution mechanism to ensure justice for small and medium-sized businesses when they have a dispute with their bank?

Lucy Frazer: I was pleased to meet my hon. Friend, together with Heather Buchanan from the all-party group on fair business banking and finance. The APPG has produced a thorough report on this very issue, which I have read with interest. As he identifies, it is important that small businesses can bring claims against the banks when they need to do so. I have spoken to the Economic Secretary to the Treasury, who is carefully considering the APPG report, together with—when it comes out—the Financial Conduct Authority’s consultation on expanding the role of Financial Ombudsman Service, and who will consider Simon Walker’s independent review of complaints. I know that he is keen to set out the Government’s position as soon as possible after that.

Lucy Powell (Manchester Central) (Lab/Co-op): Given the findings of the Lammy review, which showed that those from black and ethnic minority backgrounds face discrimination in the criminal justice system, what progress has the Department made in ensuring that juries and judges better reflect the communities that they are there to serve?

Lucy Frazer: The hon. Lady makes an important point, because everyone who takes part in our justice system, as in politics, should reflect the society that it represents. That is not only juries; it is the professions that are there to support the judiciary on the bench. It is important that we look at the position in relation to juries.

Victoria Prentis (Banbury) (Con): Following the decision to close courts in Bicester and Banbury, will the Minister agree to meet me and a group of local magistrates to discuss the provision of a mobile court locally, such as people have in Kent?

Lucy Frazer: My hon. Friend has campaigned hard on the closure of her court. I am always happy to meet with her. She made a lot of submissions to me during the consultation on the closure and put in a fair report. I am happy to meet her; and I know that she is very keen on alternative provision.

Yasmin Qureshi (Bolton South East) (Lab): We hear a lot from the Government about this so-called court modernisation programme, but many people believe that it is simply a smoke-screen to cut the number of courts and reduce the provision of legal representation for those in court. Will the Minister agree to the Law Society’s call for an independent economic review of the long-term viability of the criminal legal aid system?

Lucy Frazer: We do make a lot of court reform because we are spending £1 billion to bring our court system up to date. In relation to legal aid, we have an ongoing review that will report at the end of the year, and we will be evaluating our court reform programme.

Court Experience for Victims and Witnesses

11. Tom Pursglove (Corby) (Con): What steps the Government are taking to improve the court experience for victims and witnesses.

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Justice (Edward Argar): On 10 September, my right hon. Friend the Secretary of State and I published the first ever cross-Government victims strategy, reflecting the Government’s clear commitment to further support victims of crime. Central to the strategy are commitments to strengthen the victims code and develop legislation to underpin it, to continue ongoing work to improve the court environment, as the Under-Secretary of State for Justice, my hon. and learned Friend the Member for South East Cambridgeshire (Lucy Frazer), has already set out, to increase the use of digitisation, to increase facilities for the use of video links, to improve provision for pre-recorded cross-examination for vulnerable witnesses and to raise awareness of the importance of the victim’s personal statement and opportunities for how it can be used.

Tom Pursglove: I am grateful to the Minister for that comprehensive answer. I know from some of my constituents about the stress, strain and emotional toll
of having to repeatedly face those who have hurt them or their loved ones. What steps is his Department taking to support victims who find themselves having to repeatedly give victim impact statements?

Edward Argar: My hon. Friend takes a close interest in this area. I can entirely understand the impact on a victim of having to relive a crime multiple times. That is why the victim’s personal statement is hugely important. One of the measures that we are putting in place is the use of body-worn cameras to record the statement, which should help to reduce the number of times it needs to be made. Underpinning the strategy is the aim of reducing the number of people a victim has to interact with. If my hon. Friend wishes to highlight a specific case, I would be happy to meet him.

Ruth George (High Peak) (Lab): What steps will the Minister be putting in place to support litigants in person, particularly those employees who have to take their employer to court to seek damages for personal injury at work under the raising of the small claims limit in the Civil Liability Bill?

Edward Argar: With regard to litigants in person—I am conscious that you might wish me to keep this answer short, Mr Speaker—we already spend well over £6 million supporting them, and we continue to look carefully at how they can continue to be supported.

Law Centres

12. Mr Virendra Sharma (Ealing, Southall) (Lab): What is his Department’s policy is on law centres. [906999]

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Justice (Lucy Frazer): My Department greatly appreciates the great work that law centres are doing across the country. We support law centres with grant funding and through legal aid contracts. In April, I met Julie Bishop, the director of the Law Centres Network, and I was pleased to share a panel with LawWorks at our party conference last week. My officials are engaging actively with law centres as part of the review of the Legal Aid, Sentencing and Punishment of Offenders Act 2012.

Mr Sharma: I declare an interest, having been an employee of the Hillingdon legal resource centre and the Ealing law centre before entering Parliament. Since the Government’s disastrous cuts to legal aid, many law centres have been forced to close, leaving advice deserts in parts of the country. Will the Government commit to new funding for solicitors and paralegals to work in law centres in those parts of the country that have the greatest unmet legal needs?

Lucy Frazer: I pay tribute to the hon. Gentleman for the work he did in his community before becoming a Member of Parliament. I should also declare that I did voluntary work in a law centre for a very brief period as part of my work as a barrister. We must encourage people to volunteer to do that work, because it is greatly appreciated. As part of the LASPO review, we are looking at how we provide advice to those who need it most, and the work that law centres do is a key part of that advice. We will be reporting on that by the end of the year.

Burglary and Custodial Sentences

13. Mr Laurence Robertson (Tewkesbury) (Con): What recent estimate he has made of the proportion of people convicted of burglary offences for the first time who received custodial sentences; and if he will make a statement. [907001]

The Minister of State, Ministry of Justice (Rory Stewart): Burglary is a particularly disgusting crime, especially domestic burglary—it is not just the loss of someone’s possessions, but the terrible intrusion on their privacy and the humiliation of having someone in their home. The majority of first-time offenders do receive a conviction—73% of domestic burglars receive a prison sentence.

Mr Robertson: I thank the Minister for that response and particularly welcome his condemnation of burglary, which, as he rightly says, is a very serious offence. I therefore urge him to ensure that the sentence fits the crime, so that potential reoffenders are deterred from doing it again.

Rory Stewart: The maximum sentence for aggravated burglary is currently a life sentence. The maximum sentence for burglary is 14 years. The sentence length given by judges, and reflected by the Sentencing Council, has increased over the past 10 years. That is as it should be, because domestic burglary is a particularly disgusting and uncivilised crime, and society should be making a symbolic statement against it.

Several hon. Members rose—

Mr Speaker: Order. We are running over time, but I feel the parliamentary day would be incomplete if we did not hear from the right hon. Member for Harlow (Robert Halfon), so we shall.

School Exclusion

17. Robert Halfon (Harlow) (Con): What discussions he has had with the Secretary of State for Education on breaking the link between school exclusion and prison. [907005]

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Justice (Edward Argar): My right hon. Friend is right to highlight this issue: 23% of those given short custodial sentences were previously excluded from school. I have not personally met the Secretary of State for Education to discuss this matter, but I have corresponded with the Minister with responsibility for schools on exactly this issue. I regularly meet the Under-Secretary of State for the Department for Education about linked issues, and my officials and I are engaged with the Department for Education on its exclusions review.

Robert Halfon: Thank you, Mr Speaker. An increasing number of pupils are being excluded from our schools, and 60% of our prisoners were excluded when in our education system. What action is the Ministry of Justice taking to work with the Department for Education to provide serious support to those who have experienced exclusion and are at risk of offending?
Edward Argar: As I briefly mentioned, my officials and I have already engaged with the Department for Education’s exclusions review, submitting an analysis by the Ministry of Justice on the correlation between offenders and exclusions. Key to tackling this issue is joined-up working across government and agencies. I heard about this issue on a recent visit to Hackney youth offending team. I will continue to work closely with Ministers and other Departments to develop measures to support the exclusions review when it reports.

Mr Speaker: We have heard it from Harlow, so I think we should hear it from Glasgow.

20. [907008] Carol Monaghan (Glasgow North West) (SNP): Thank you, Mr Speaker, for allowing me to come in on this question. Scotland aims to be the world’s first trauma-aware nation by considering the link between adverse childhood experience and future offending, so will the Minister look at the work being done in Scotland to break the cycle of offending and imprisonment of some of the most vulnerable individuals in our society?

Edward Argar: I thank the hon. Lady for her question. I am always happy to look at the devolved nations for examples of best practice from which we might learn. She is right to highlight the links in this area, which is one reason why, in the victims strategy, we allocated moneys to support children who have witnessed domestic abuse in their past—to help to break that cycle and give them a chance of recovery.

Topical Questions

T1. [907010] Sarah Jones (Croydon Central) (Lab): If he will make a statement on his departmental responsibilities.

The Lord Chancellor and Secretary of State for Justice (Mr David Gauke): Following a successful pilot, we have made the decision to equip every prison officer in the public sector adult male estate with PAVA spray. PAVA can help to prevent serious harm to staff and prisoners alike, as well as being a tool to persuade prisoners in the act of violence to stop. All officers will receive specialist training before being allowed to carry the spray, and it will be delivered only where key worker training has already been rolled out. Key working will allow officers to build more positive relationships with prisoners, support their rehabilitation and manage difficult behaviour.

Sarah Jones: I am grateful to the Under-Secretary of State for Justice, the hon. and learned Member for South East Cambridgeshire (Lucy Frazer), for meeting me and the family of Jerome Rogers before the summer recess. Jerome took his own life after aggressive bailiff threats and intimidation. Does the Secretary of State find it astonishing that charities giving advice about debt, such as Citizens Advice, are regulated by the Financial Conduct Authority, yet bailiffs, with infinitely more power, are not? Will he confirm that this will form part of the consultation?

Mr Gauke: As my hon. and learned Friend mentioned a moment ago, we will conduct a call for evidence shortly. That will be an opportunity to look at all these issues. I express my condolences to the family of the hon. Lady’s constituent.

T6. [907015] Michael Tomlinson (Mid Dorset and North Poole) (Con): What progress has been made towards introducing a presumption against short-term prison sentences, which will both help to support victims and reduce reoffending?

The Minister of State, Ministry of Justice (Rory Stewart): As the Secretary of State has made clear, we feel very strongly that we should look and act on the evidence that a short-term prison sentence is more likely to lead to reoffending than a community sentence, and that therefore, in a sense, it endangers the public. The point of a sentence of any kind must be primarily to prevent offending happening in the future. For that reason, we will look very carefully at emphasising community sentences.

Gloria De Piero (Ashfield) (Lab): It defies belief that a spouse convicted of attempting to murder their partner can have any financial claim on their assets as part of a divorce settlement. Does the Minister agree with that principle and will she meet me to look into changing the law to ensure that there is no financial entitlement in all but the most exceptional of those cases?

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Justice (Lucy Frazer): The shadow Minister makes a very important point, and the issue has also been highlighted by The Guardian. The Matrimonial Causes Act 1973 says that the conduct of the parties in a divorce can be taken into account in the distribution of assets and, if it would be inequitable, to disregard it. I am very happy to discuss the issue with her and to meet her to do so.

T7. [907016] Tom Pursglove (Corby) (Con): What steps are the Government taking to ensure that when two parties take the decision to divorce, the legal process does not exacerbate conflict?

Lucy Frazer: My hon. Friend makes an important point. Once parties have made a decision to get divorced, the law should make it straightforward for them to do so, making it less acrimonious, which makes it better for children. For that reason, on 15 September we launched our reducing family conflict consultation on no-fault divorce.

Stuart C. McDonald (Cumbernauld, Kilsyth and Kirkintilloch East) (SNP): People are still having to wait an average of 42 weeks to get a hearing before the immigration and asylum first-tier tribunal, which is a long time to be in immigration limbo. What steps are the Government taking to reduce that time and what do they regard as an unacceptable waiting time target?

Lucy Frazer: The hon. Gentleman is right to highlight that waiting times for tribunals could be reduced. We are recruiting new members of the tribunals; in February and March, we appointed 226 new medical members of the social security tribunal. I am also meeting, and have met twice, my counterpart in the Department for Work and Pensions to ensure that we can get those waiting times down.

T8. [907017] Robert Halfon (Harlow) (Con): One problem that we have faced in Harlow with unauthorised encampments is the cat-and-mouse scenario that when camps are evicted they can just move further down
the road. What can my hon. and learned Friend do to strengthen the law and end the problem of unauthorised encampments once and for all?

Lucy Frazer: As I represent a rural constituency, I completely understand my right hon. Friend’s point. The Government have recently consulted on the powers available to local authorities to deal with such problems and we are now looking at how we might strengthen the powers of local authorities and landowners.

Richard Burgon (Leeds East) (Lab): The Prime Minister told her party conference that austerity is over, but if that were true, everyone in the justice sector would be breathing a huge sigh of relief. Tory cuts have unleashed an unprecedented crisis in our prisons and wider justice system. Justice faces the deepest cuts of any Department, totalling 40%, with £800 million in cuts between April 2018 and 2020 alone. Those cuts risk pushing justice from deep crisis into full-blown emergency, so will the Secretary of State confirm that that £800 million of cuts will not go ahead? If not, will he agree with me that the Prime Minister’s words were nothing more than yet another Tory con trick?

Mr Gauke: What I can confirm is that we are continuing to recruit more prison officers and to invest in court reform. As the hon. Gentleman mentions party conferences, I have to point out to him that as the shadow Lord Chancellor, when somebody suggested an illegal general strike, the hon. Gentleman—[Interruption.] Well, he denied that he joined in a standing ovation, but he did say that he stood up and clapped.

Richard Burgon: To bring things back down to earth, the people who clean and tidy the Secretary of State’s office—perhaps even when he is in it—have been demanding a real living wage of £10 an hour. Those Ministry of Justice cleaners are sick and tired of being treated like dirt, and his security guards, who keep the Ministry of Justice safe, are in the same boat. I wrote to the Secretary of State demanding that he sort this out, but he used outsourcing as his excuse for inaction. Instead of repeating his excuses to me today, will he address the Ministry of Justice staff today and tell them why he thinks that they are not worth £10 an hour?

Mr Gauke: We are the Government who introduced the national living wage, which increased in April by 4.4%. We were able to do that because we are running a strong economy. That would not happen if the hon. Gentleman got his hands on this country.

Lucy Frazer: I referred earlier to the steps we are taking in the MOJ in relation to medical members to reduce social security PIP and ESA appeals, but we are also introducing 250 more judges across tribunals. I welcome the very recent appointment of Grant Harvey Bird in September as a salaried judge for the first-tier tribunal in Gloucestershire.

T2. [907011] Ms Marie Rimmer (St Helens South and Whiston) (Lab): Last year, my constituency had the third highest rate in the country of complaints against bailiffs. Since 2014-15, Citizens Advice has seen a 74% increase in people seeking help with how to complain about bailiffs. Will the Minister commit to exploring the need for an effective mechanism, as well as the independent regulator, for registering complaints against bailiffs?

Lucy Frazer: As I mentioned, we are looking into this, and we will, I hope, very shortly launch our call for evidence, which will look at a number of issues.

Vicky Ford (Chelmsford) (Con): People in Chelmsford are concerned about levels of violence in the prison, and they want to know that prison officers are safe. Will pepper spray help?

Rory Stewart: This morning, we announced that officers will be able to carry pepper spray on their belts. This is to be used as a last resort, in the same way as a baton would be. It means that if, for example, a prisoner was in the process of stamping on another prisoner’s head, an officer could intervene safely from a distance to resolve the incident and potentially save lives. It is one measure, along with a dozen other measures that we have to take to improve safety in prisons, but it is an important measure to protect the people who protect us.

T3. [907012] Luciana Berger (Liverpool, Wavertree) (Lab/Co-op): Over the conference recess, the inspectorate of probation published a report on the Merseyside community rehabilitation company. The report observes that the approach to reviewing risk of harm is limited, putting vulnerable people in danger. Have Ministers read the report, and what will the Department be doing to ensure that vulnerable people in Liverpool are given the protection that they need?

Rory Stewart: We take the report very seriously, as we take all reports, including the recent report on domestic violence. It is absolutely right to say that we need to improve the risk assessment, the programme plans and the frequency of meeting. We are doing a consultation at the moment, to which we invite the hon. Lady to make a submission, on exactly what we can do to tighten up procedures for the CRCs. They have reduced reoffending by 2%, but there is much more that we can do on the quality of delivery.¹

Robert Neill (Bromley and Chislehurst) (Con): Given that, yet again, the recruitment round of High Court judges has fallen short and, given that many distinguished retired judges are kept busy as arbitrators and wish to continue working, is it not time to look again at whether the arbitrary judicial retirement age of 70 is out of line with modern practice?

Mr Gauke: This is an issue that we continue to look at. I think it is a finely balanced matter, and we continue to look at the evidence. The argument is sometimes made that if we increase the retirement age, we will increase the age at which people apply to become judges. We will continue to look at the matter.

¹[Official Report, 22 October 2018, Vol. 648, c. 3MC.]
Bambos Charalambous (Enfield, Southgate) (Lab): Recent research published by the Law Society found that people who did not receive early advice were 20% less likely to have had their issue resolved than those who did. Will the Minister commit to reintroducing legal aid for early advice?

Lucy Frazer: I read that advice from the Law Society with interest. I recently met the Law Society and a number of solicitors that it brought with it to discuss the issues that face the profession, in relation not only to legal advice but to the age of the profession. As I have mentioned, we are doing a legal aid review, which will report at the end of the year.

Rachel Maclean (Redditch) (Con): Ministers in the Department are aware of the deep concerns of one of my constituents, who has been impacted by a very long wait for a second post-mortem following the loss of her brother. This has also impacted on other people, up and down the country. Will the Minister agree to meet me to see what more can be done to address the concerns of my constituent and her fellow RoadPeace campaigners?

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Justice (Edward Argar): I am very happy to give the assurance that I will meet my hon. Friend.

Laura Smith (Crewe and Nantwich) (Lab): Given the criticisms contained in the report produced recently by Her Majesty's inspectorate of probation, what assurances can the Minister give that all community rehabilitation companies’ contracts will stipulate that the probation officer qualification is absolutely necessary for the safe supervision of cases in which domestic violence is a factor?

Rory Stewart: As I have said, we have looked very seriously at the inspectorate’s domestic violence report. It is worth bearing in mind that this has been a problem in many probation services across the world, and that it was, in fact, a problem before the CRCs were introduced. We are looking closely at the question of qualification during the current consultation, which will run for a further six months.1

Kevin Foster (Torbay) (Con): I know that the Lord Chancellor takes the role of the rule of law in this country very seriously, but can he reassure me that the Government will always stand up for it, and would resist—and certainly would not stand up and clap—any suggestions that it should be broken?

Mr Gauke: I can certainly give that assurance, and I must say that it is extraordinary for the shadow Lord Chancellor to condone mass law-breaking.

Dan Carden (Liverpool, Walton) (Lab): Last month prison officers took unprecedented action by staging a day of protest outside prisons, including HM Prison Liverpool in Walton. Has the Minister spoken to the Prison Officers Association since then, and what has changed since its members took their unprecedented action?

Rory Stewart: That action was very regrettable. As the hon. Gentleman knows, prison officers are not entitled to strike legally, because it endangers prisoners and other prison officers. I met the chairman of the POA on the morning of the action—two hours later—and we had a number of discussions, which focused particularly on safety. We believe that working constructively, and not engaging in illegal strike action, is much better for prisons and prison officers.

Mary Glindon (North Tyneside) (Lab): If the Minister is sincere when he insists that the decision to build new private prisons is not ideological but based on evidence, why is he trying to bury the evidence by refusing to release the official report on public-versus-private procurement for the two new prisons, despite freedom of information requests from the Prison Officers Association and parliamentary questions that remain unanswered?

Rory Stewart: If it is okay, I would like to meet the hon. Lady to understand in more detail exactly which request is being discussed. I am very happy to talk about it in person.

Debbie Abrahams (Oldham East and Saddleworth) (Lab): Given the very lucrative public contracts given to Atos and Capita, and the fact that they are clearly failing—71% of assessments for personal independence payments are overturned in the upper courts—what discussions has the Justice Secretary had with his counterpart in the Department for Work and Pensions about the imposition of a fining system? Atos and Capita are not only blocking up the courts, but treating disabled people appallingly.

Mr Gauke: I have regular conversations with the Secretary of State for Work and Pensions about a range of matters, including this one. We continue to do everything we can to ensure that the system is working properly.

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Food Labelling and Allergy-Related Deaths

3.43 pm

Melanie Onn (Great Grimsby) (Lab) (Urgent Question): To ask the Secretary of State for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs what action he is taking to improve the quality of UK food labelling to prevent further allergy-related deaths.

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs (David Rutley) rose—

Mr Speaker: Order. Before I call the Minister to respond, I should make it clear that I have waived the sub judice resolution to allow reference to the inquest into the death of Mrs Celia Marsh. However, I ask right hon. and hon. Members to exercise caution in referring to that case—if they are minded to do so at all—in order to avoid any possible prejudice to those proceedings.

David Rutley: First, I want to say how deeply upsetting the deaths of Celia Marsh and Natasha Ednan-Laperouse are and that my heart goes out to the families, friends and loved ones affected by those tragedies. This House will appreciate that investigations into Celia Marsh’s death are ongoing and it would be inappropriate for Ministers to make further comment on this particular incident at this stage. However, Members should be in no doubt about how seriously we take these issues. It is essential that all UK consumers have complete trust in the food they are eating.

Current food labelling law is set out in the EU’s food information to consumers legislation. This legislation includes a list of 14 allergens, including milk and sesame, which are legally considered to be mandatory information that must be available to consumers. The regulations currently allow for some flexibility at a national level as to how this information is provided on food that is not pre-packed and food which is “pre-packed for direct sale”. The former includes products such as loose cookies or sandwiches which are prepared and wrapped directly for the consumer. The latter category—“pre-packed for direct sale”—includes products such as freshly prepared sandwiches made on site, as compared with packaged food such as a chocolate bar or ready meal that we might find in a supermarket.

I must make it absolutely clear that, under the current regulations, information must be made available to the consumer in all cases. However, whereas packaged food must include all allergens in bold in the ingredients list, information about non pre-packed food, such as pre-packed food for direct sale, can be made available by any means the operator chooses, including the use of clear signs indicating that the customer should speak to a member of staff who will provide the information orally.

As the Secretary of State announced at the start of this year, we have been looking at developing new approaches to food labelling to ensure that consumers have the information they need. The death of Natasha has shone a harsh spotlight on the issue of allergen labelling in particular and whether the current framework is still suitable. Natasha’s parents have made a powerful case for change, and I am sure the whole House will join me in paying tribute to the tremendous grace and strength they have shown in these particularly challenging circumstances.

The Secretary of State has asked the Department for urgent advice on how we can strengthen the current allergen labelling framework. That review is under way, and DEFRA is working closely with the Food Standards Agency and the Department for Health and Social Care. This morning we received the coroner’s report into Natasha’s death and we will study it very carefully as part of that review. Tomorrow, DEFRA will be holding talks with the devolved Administrations to see what approach they may wish to take, as this is a devolved matter.

We take this issue very seriously. I assure Members that we are working at pace to review the current rules and will set out our proposed way forward as soon as possible.

Melanie Onn: I am grateful to you, Mr Speaker, for allowing this urgent question. The Minister is absolutely right: it is the tragic cases of 15-year-old Natasha Ednan-Laperouse and Celia Marsh that have thrown into sharp focus the common practices used by high-street convenience food providers to avoid doing all in their power to ensure their customers are safe. The Minister says the Government are taking this very seriously, but if that were the case surely the Secretary of State would be here to respond to the urgent question.

For years, this situation has been defended by the Government, who have said that tighter definition around, for example, regulation 5 of the food information regulations would be damaging to small business. But when did the Minister last review food label standards, and, given that regulations are supposed to be the bare minimum expected of companies, what have the Government done to make clear their expectations of food providers? The Minister referred to the expectation that, where there is signage, staff would be asked by customers whether there were any products with allergens, but how does he know whether those staff have been properly trained? Does he still think that signposting is sufficient as notice of potential allergy risks?

Have the Minister or the Secretary of State ever told larger companies that the expectations of Government are higher for them, given their vast customer base and extensive resources? Pret now says that it will include full ingredient labelling on all products—so they can do this when they want to. Must it always take a tragedy to effect meaningful change from this Government? Has the Secretary of State ever put this case across when in meetings with representatives of the sector?

Earlier in the year the Secretary of State spoke of “gold standard” food labelling but failed to mention allergies. Do he or his Department regret putting off a review of food labelling until after Brexit? If the Department introduces new legislation as recommended by the coroner in this inquest, will he also be ensuring that the Food Standards Agency is adequately resourced to make preventive checks in advance of another fatal incident occurring? Finally, does the Minister agree that, with food allergies seemingly on the rise, improved labelling, regulations around labelling and broader education about food allergies need to be put to the top of his “to do” list?
David Rutley: I thank the hon. Lady for her points, which she has raised with great sincerity and conviction, as always. I am sure that food is an important priority for the businesses in her constituency; it certainly is for many of us as well. She made an important point about discussions with small businesses. The Food Standards Agency, with whom I have been speaking this afternoon, is responsible for policy, and our local authorities work hard to take forward enforcement. In those conversations, it is clear that we are taking forward campaigns to improve awareness among consumers and businesses.

The hon. Lady also made important points about the steps that Pret a Manger is taking. It has set out what it is going to be doing initially, and it will—like the rest of us, particularly officials in the Department for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs—be studying the coroner’s report carefully, as it sets out some challenging conclusions. Pret will want to consider how it will approach its business in the light of those conclusions. I hope that I have set out clearly that it is a priority that we take action here, and as I have said, this is something the Secretary of State talked about in January, saying that we wanted to move this forward. Clearly, because of these tragic cases, that work needs to be accelerated with real pace.

Mr Marcus Jones (Nuneaton) (Con): These are tragic cases, and it is clear that the law needs to be updated. Will my hon. Friend tell us how quickly he expects the law to be changed in this regard? Will he also say more about what the Government are doing to provide guidance to retailers, to ensure that this type of tragedy does not happen again?

David Rutley: I thank my hon. Friend for his questions. As I have said, we are taking this review forward at pace, and it is now being accelerated so that we can take forward a review of food standards and food labelling at real pace.

The other thing that we have been doing—clearly, in the light of these cases, we need to do more—is to make consumers and businesses aware of the options available, particularly to consumers. It is worth highlighting that we need to find ways of communicating to 16 to 24-year-olds, who are very vulnerable, the ways in which they can find the important information that they need when making food choices.

Sue Hayman (Workington) (Lab): Clearly, the recent news of these two deaths caused by allergic reactions to Pret a Manger products has been absolutely tragic; I would like to echo the Minister’s earlier comments and say that all our thoughts are with the families and friends of Natasha Ednan-Laperouse and Celia Marsh. These cases have demonstrated just how serious food allergies can be and the fatal consequences that can ensue. That is why proper, rigorous food labelling is paramount to our food safety standards. It was welcome that the Prime Minister called last week for a review of food labelling laws; that is something that I agree with and support. The Minister mentioned the review earlier, but when can we expect further information on when it will be completed and what it is likely to contain?

I appreciate that it is early days, following these events, but as we have seen, food labelling is a serious public health matter. To that end, what discussions have DEFRA Ministers and officials had with their colleagues in the Department of Health and Social Care? We welcome the fact that Pret a Manger and other retailers such as Greggs have said that they will review how they label their food. Pret is now saying that it will list all the ingredients, including allergens, in its freshly made products, but we need this to happen right across the board. This is absolutely vital for people with life-threatening food allergies. Full ingredients lists should not just be a “nice to have”. For some people, they really are the difference between life and death. Food producers, suppliers and retailers have a public health duty to ensure that every food item is properly labelled.

Tomorrow, we will be discussing the Government’s Agriculture Bill, which will mean that the Environment Secretary will be in charge of our nation’s food production for the first time in decades. The Bill also provides a unique opportunity to put in place strong laws around food that could include the full labelling of all ingredients, allergens in particular. As we have heard, the Food Standards Agency states that food products containing the 14 main ingredients likely to cause an allergic reaction must be labelled as such and that manufacturers must then make it clear whether products contain those allergens. However, under EU law, as the Minister mentioned earlier, that can be done orally—it does not have to be written down—so customers will have to go out of their way to ask staff if allergens are not listed on a label.

I am pleased that the Minister referred to that anomaly but, as requested by my hon. Friend the Member for Great Grimsby (Melanie Onn), does the Minister believe that it is time to mandate that all allergens must be set out clearly in written format? Will he provide the House with a cast-iron guarantee that there will be no attempt to water down any current food labelling laws after Brexit? For example, in US law only eight major allergens have to be listed, as opposed to the FSA’s 14, and any trade deal with the US cannot come at the price of watered-down food safety standards. We clearly need urgent action to ensure that British food labelling is as good as it possibly can be to ensure that such tragic cases never happen again.

David Rutley: I thank the hon. Lady for her questions. She makes penetrating points, as always. As the father of a daughter with allergy problems, I assure her that I take such things incredibly seriously. I have recently come to this post—we have worked together on issues such as the ivory ban—and she can rest assured that I will be taking this matter up with the utmost seriousness and will tackle it as a matter of urgency.

Mr Philip Hollobone (Kettering) (Con): When will we make it a requirement to label halal and kosher products as such to better inform consumers who may or may not wish to buy such products?

David Rutley: I will come back to my hon. Friend with further thoughts when we can meet to discuss that matter further.

Andy Slaughter (Hammersmith) (Lab): Natasha Ednan-Laperouse was my constituent. When I met her father early last year, he relived the hour he spent trying to save her life on the British Airways flight from Heathrow...
to Nice. No parent should have to go through such an appalling experience. I say gently to the Minister that I think he is the wrong person giving the wrong response today. Pret and the other food outlets have passed the buck to the Government, and the Government should not pass matters of policy to the Food Standards Agency. Will he at least say when the review will report back and whether he will issue unofficial guidelines to food outlets in the meantime about listing ingredients and contamination? Finally, will he co-ordinate with his colleagues in Government on consumer safety? Local authorities are now so denuded of funds that trading standards and other agencies are unable to enforce the law even as it is.

David Rutley: I am sitting next to a Health and Social Care Minister, so I can assure the hon. Member for Hammersmith (Andy Slaughter) that we will be working closely and carefully across Government. He makes an important point about the tragic circumstances in which Natasha’s parents found themselves, and this situation is testament to them and the way that they have conducted themselves. The Secretary of State has written to them and is keen to meet them to discuss their concerns and how to move things forward. The report will be swift, but we received the coroner’s report only today and it sets out some challenging conclusions to which we need to respond properly.

Rachel Maclean (Redditch) (Con): I am sure that every one of us who is a parent will have found the account of what Natasha’s parents had to go through harrowing and awful. I am therefore delighted that the Minister is responding as he is. Does he agree that a new law to recognise their daughter would be a fitting tribute to their bravery and dedication?

David Rutley: Absolutely. As a parent, one can barely consider what they must have gone through during those hours on the flight and afterwards.

Helen Goodman (Bishop Auckland) (Lab): Speaking as one who always has to carry two epipens, I think that the Government need to take a wider view. Please could the review also include restaurant food, and will the Minister talk to his colleagues in the Department of Health about better training for medics and paramedics and more research into this growing crisis?

David Rutley: Yes, it does need to be wide. Yes, we need to involve other areas such as training for paramedics. We need to make sure that there is much better information and training. It is very serious, and I will make sure that that happens.

James Heappey (Wells) (Con): I very much echo the condolences offered from the Dispatch Box, and warmly welcome the review that my hon. Friend the Member for Hammersmith has outlined today. However, in my constituency there are dozens of small food producers, many of whom produce food for direct sale at markets around Somerset and the wider south-west. While my hon. Friend will want to strengthen the regulations for large retailers, may I encourage him to apply some common sense in the way in which we apply them to small producers selling locally?

David Rutley: Common sense, yes, but the priority has to be food safety. UK consumers need to feel safe when they consume food, wherever it may be, and we need to find mechanisms to ensure that, whether food manufacturers and retailers are small or large, they get information across to consumers. It needs to be proportionate, but it needs to be effective as well.

Mary Creagh (Wakefield) (Lab): I am sure that the hearts of the whole House went out to Natasha’s family as they relived at the coroner’s inquest her tragic and avoidable death. Natasha was a careful consumer who was not given the information that she needed from Pret a Manger to keep herself safe. Does her death not show that the current food labelling regulations are not fit for purpose? Will the Minister ensure that no amount of special pleading, loopholes and laxity on the part of the food industry deters him from his, I am sure, definite intent to tighten the labelling regulations, strengthen trading standards enforcement and increase the money that goes from his Department to the public analysts so that food in shops can be tested?

David Rutley: As I have said on several occasions in responding to this urgent question, there is no question but that we need to strengthen the regulations. We need to get to grips with the coroner’s report. I echo the hon. Lady’s point that there should be no wriggling off the hook here. It is important that Pret a Manger and other companies look at that report and its implications and work out how they are going to respond.

Kevin Foster (Torbay) (Con): It is 30 years since my father was diagnosed as a coeliac—a condition that I know is shared by at least one person on the Treasury Bench this afternoon. In that time, we have gone from having to walk round a supermarket with a book, hoping that ingredients had not changed since it was published, to being able to rely on the labelling on a product to know whether it is suitable for him.

What further progress does the Minister think that the Government could make in looking at technological solutions that allow consumers to use smart phones and apps to get a full list of ingredients, not just the ones that might be on a label?

David Rutley: My hon. Friend makes an important point. We need to look at all means possible to provide the information. It is pivotal that we respond to the needs particularly of 16 to 24-year-olds, who are beginning to make independent choices about their food. Let us find ways of making that information available. Technology will be important, especially for that generation.

Mr Alistair Carmichael (Orkney and Shetland) (LD): Most of those who suffer from food allergies rely on medicines to manage their reactions, but the data sheets for the medicines themselves are often incomplete. A constituent explained to me last week that medicines for handling anaphylactic reactions can often include lactose and soya without having that on the data sheet. So as well as looking to his own departmental responsibilities, will he speak to his colleagues in the Department of Health and Social Care to ensure that when people rely on medicines, they know that they can use them safely?
David Rutley: That is another important point, and I will make sure officials factor it into their review; we need to work closely with colleagues from the Department of Health and Social Care to make sure it is factored into the approach we take forward.

Robert Halfon (Harlow) (Con): As well as more careful food labelling, will my hon. Friend look at fake labelling? I do not know whether he has seen today’s Daily Mail, which suggests that the claims made by Pret a Manger of supplying fresh bread are far from the case and that the bread is actually frozen for a year and comes from France. It is important that consumers are not deceived—they pay a lot of money for these products. Will he therefore look at fake labelling and make sure that it does not happen?

David Rutley: We should be proud of the standard of our food in the UK; we are world-renowned for it. My right hon. Friend makes an important point: retailers and manufacturers need to be transparent about the quality of their food. We want it to be of the highest level. We need to be clear as to where the product—in this case, bread—is sourced from and how it is then prepared for consumption. All these things need to be much more transparent for the consumer—he is absolutely right.

Maria Eagle (Garston and Halewood) (Lab): Pret is not a small corner shop, but a large industrial producer of food. It baked into that baguette a known allergen and then proceeded to sell it without labelling it, using a loophole meant for small corner shops. The Minister should be outraged about that. I welcome the fact he has said he will strengthen the law, but what is he going to do to strengthen enforcement and the capacity of trading standards and the FSA to enforce the rules? Enforcement is as important as getting the rules right.

David Rutley: Yes, we need to get the rules right, we need to enforce and we need to ensure that business steps up to the plate. The hon. Lady is absolutely right to say that Pret is not a corner shop, but a major player in the food sector. I hope Members of this House will read the coroner’s report, because it is incredibly challenging and Pret needs to step up to the plate and see what the report says. I have had those conversations myself. That is the kind of response, I hope, that we can get from Pret. There are some situations, especially those involving younger people who may not be familiar with allergy work. There are some situations, especially those involving younger people who may not be familiar

Ms Angela Eagle (Wallasey) (Lab): Surely the Government should step out of their complacent attitude to regulation and strengthen enforcement, too. Instead of seeing regulation as something to be avoided and red tape as a dirty word, surely it is about time the Minister and his Department stepped up to the plate and did the things that need to be done to protect the consumer.

David Rutley: And we are; I have said on numerous occasions that we will be strengthening the allergen labelling framework. We are committed to doing that—

Ms Angela Eagle: When?

David Rutley: As soon as possible, because we do not want to see any more of these cases that we have so tragically heard about in recent days; we need to take the steps to do that in an organised way.

Dr Caroline Johnson (Sleaford and North Hykeham) (Con): The investigation into Natasha’s death showed that she died a tragic and avoidable death, one that could have been prevented by better food labelling. I welcome the fact that the Minister is looking at this issue with great speed. Can he give any indication about the timeframe, because others remain at risk during this period?

David Rutley: I cannot give any further indication, other than that we will be working at pace and taking the report forward as soon as possible. As Members have said—and I feel the same way—we want to make sure that all consumers are safe. I re-emphasise, though, that the coroner’s report has only just been received and we need to take it into account in the final conclusions.

Nick Smith (Blaenau Gwent) (Lab): Food labelling concerns put pressure on the NHS as people check for allergies. Knowing about an allergy can be a matter of life or death. What are the Government doing to approve and promote fast and reliable tests to diagnose allergies and help to save lives?

David Rutley: We need to work closely with the hospitals, and I will work closely on this with my colleagues in the Department. Interesting feedback mechanisms are being piloted in the north-east, where hospitals are providing feedback to local authorities on allergies and how best to respond to them. That sort of best practice needs to be taken forward.

Nick Thomas-Symonds (Torfaen) (Lab): For how long does the Minister think that large conglomerates have been taking advantage of this loophole, in the form of looser regulation of food prepared on the premises, which is meant to protect small businesses? What message will he send out to those conglomerates to stop taking advantage of it prior to the publication of his review?

David Rutley: When the initial regulations were established, stakeholders were involved in framing them, and those stakeholders included organisations involved with allergy work. There are some situations, especially those involving younger people who may not be familiar with packaging, in which people can have a conversation with an individual across the counter so that they can understand what allergens might be in a particular product. I have had those conversations myself. That is a mechanism and we need to make sure that it is properly enforced. As I have said a couple of times at
the Dispatch Box, it is really important that businesses look into how they can increase consumer confidence in their work. We will take forward at pace the review of the regulations, in order to play our part, too.

Wera Hobhouse (Bath) (LD): I add my condolences to those expressed for the family and friends of the two victims.

In January, on being notified by the coroner that Celia Marsh had died at the Royal United Hospital in Bath, Bath and North East Somerset Council notified Pret A Manger, but it appears that the council did not notify the FSA, which was notified by Pret A Manger six weeks later—a long delay. What public responsibility does Bath and North East Somerset Council trading standards have to regulate and enforce food safety in our city?

David Rutley: I am not able to give a complete update on the situation in respect of Celia Marsh’s death because the investigations are still ongoing. On the hon. Lady’s point about enforcement in her local area, I will gladly meet her and we can decide how to take the matter forward.

Dangerous Waste and Body Parts Disposal: NHS

4.13 pm

Jonathan Ashworth (Leicester South) (Lab/Co-op) (Urgent Question): To ask the Secretary of State for Health and Social Care to make a statement on the accumulation of hundreds of tonnes of dangerous waste.

The Minister for Health (Stephen Barclay): As I set out in the written statement published this morning, on 31 July the Environment Agency notified central Government of an issue concerning clinical waste disposal. The primary concern was that too much waste was being held by a contractor, Healthcare Environment Services, in a number of waste storage and treatment sites. This included waste collected from hospitals and other public services. Although the waste was stored securely, it was not being disposed of within the correct regulatory timescales.

The Department of Health and Social Care, the NHS, the Department for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs, the Environment Agency and the Cabinet Office have worked together to resolve the issues. Our priority throughout has been to ensure that proper measures were put in place to enable trusts to continue to operate as normal. A major part of the contingency plans concerned commercially sensitive contractual discussions with HES and other providers.

Following the Environment Agency’s partial suspension of HES’s Normanton site, which came into force on 3 October 2018, NHS Improvement wrote to HES to raise its concerns. NHSI gave HES an opportunity to set out how it was complying with its legal and contractual obligations; HES failed to provide that assurance. As a result, 15 NHS trusts served contract termination notices on Sunday 7 October. As part of our contingency arrangements, we ran a tender process with the clinical waste sector before awarding a new contract to Mitie. As contracts with HES were terminated over the weekend, Mitie stepped in and, from Monday morning, provided continuing waste collection and incineration across all of these organisations.

In September, officials from the Department of Health and Social Care visited each of the major trauma centres affected and confirmed that waste was being stored correctly and that contingency plans were in place.

In addition, visits have been undertaken to each of the sites by the Environment Agency this weekend and this week, alongside earlier visits. The Environment Agency is continuing its enforcement action against HES. This includes ensuring that excess waste is cleared from non-compliant sites. The Government are working with the Environment Agency and the NHS to ensure that lessons are learned, and we are reviewing how contracts will be awarded in the future. I have updated the House on this situation today as new contracts were implemented on Sunday following the conclusion of this commercially sensitive process. Our priority throughout has been to ensure that measures were put in place so that the NHS could continue operating as normal. No gap in service provision has been reported and we are working to ensure that that remains the case.
Jonathan Ashworth: This is an absolutely horrific scandal. A private contractor has failed in its responsibilities to a quite staggering degree. Three hundred and fifty tonnes of waste, including human body parts, amputated limbs, infectious fluid and substances of cancer, was left effectively stockpiled and not safely disposed of; it is an absolute scandal. How on earth did we get to this? If the Environment Agency first raised concerns in March, if Ministers were formally informed in July, and if Cobra was convened and chaired by the Health Secretary last month—by the way, I really think that the Health Secretary should be answering questions at the Dispatch Box today—why was the decision taken not to inform Parliament and the public sooner? Given that concerns were raised in March, why did the NHS not intervene earlier? In fact, concerns were raised with NHS England last year, so can the Minister tell us what monitoring, if any, of the HES contract was put in place by the Department and Ministers?

The Minister referred to 15 trusts having terminated their contracts. The Health Service Journal reported that up to 50 trusts were affected. Will he clarify what the status is of the contracts with the remaining 35 trusts? Where Mitie has taken over the contracts, what regulation and oversight of Mitie and its subcontractors is now in place? Is he confident that there are enough incinerators across the country to dispose of waste in a timely manner?

Let me turn now to the public health implications. At the Normanton site, we were told that waste is now in refrigerators, but where was it before if not in refrigerators? Hospitals are now using temporary containers, but questions have been raised about the public safety implications of those containers. Can the Minister give us an absolute guarantee that those containers are safe and that there is no public health risk?

We are picking up the pieces, yet again, of another disastrous procurement of an outsourced contract by a private firm going wrong. What plans are now in place to ensure that something like this never happens again?

Stephen Barclay: Let me pick up on the various points that the hon. Gentleman has raised. On when Parliament was told, as I said in my statement, the partial suspension notice was served on the company on 3 October and new contracts were put in place over the weekend. This is, therefore, the first opportunity, following what had been commercially sensitive negotiations, to notify the House. It is also right to remind Members that the key strategic objective throughout has been to maintain operations at NHS hospitals to ensure that clinical waste is being collected. That strategic objective has been maintained at all times.

The hon. Gentleman asked a number of other questions, including whether there is enough incinerator capacity in the system. The answer to that is, yes there is. There are 24 incinerators. The Department for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs estimates that there is more than 30,000 tonnes of spare capacity in the system, and that there is significant capacity over and above that required by HES to perform its contract, so I can be very clear to the House that, moving forward, there is sufficient incinerator capacity.

The hon. Gentleman used some inflammatory language. It is worth reminding the House that just 1.1% of this clinical waste is anatomical, so some of the media headlines are slightly out of step with reality. The partial suspension that has been served on Normanton is solely in respect of the incinerator; it does not apply to the other sites under HES contractual arrangements with the trust.

The hon. Gentleman asked whether the waste was being secured safely. The answer is yes; the Environment Agency has been inspecting the situation. The issue is the overstorage of waste, not that the waste is not being stored in a safe manner. /Interruption./ Well, that is the legal remit of the Environment Agency, which is an independent body. It is right that the law is applied; the hon. Gentleman may not like to apply the law, but this is the legal process. Officials from the Department of Health have been to the major trauma sites to see the contingency plans at first hand, and the storage and capacity is in place at those sites.

The reality is that there was a contractual arrangement with a supplier that stored the waste correctly, but stored too much of it. The Environment Agency is enforcing against that. We have put in place contingency plans within the trusts and set up alternative provision in the form of a contract with Mitie. The key strategic objective of ensuring that NHS operations continue has been secured.

Dr Sarah Wollaston (Totnes) (Con): I thank the Minister for the prompt action that he has taken since being notified of this situation. Will he reassure people in the community and in community settings that this issue will not affect their safety?

Stephen Barclay: The Chair of the Health Committee raises an important point regarding residents in the areas where the sites are located, and I see the right hon. Member for Normanton, Pontefract and Castleford (Yvette Cooper) in her place. The Environment Agency has confirmed that the waste is being stored safely; it is the amount of waste that is the issue. Many of our constituents are waiting for operations on these sites and will want reassurance that those operations can continue in a timely fashion. That has been a key focus of the Department, and I pay tribute to the work of officials in the NHS, the Department of Health, DEFRA and the Environment Agency, who have ensured that that strategic objective has been maintained.

Dr Philippa Whitford (Central Ayrshire) (SNP): This situation does indeed sound graphic and horrific. Equally, I recognise that much of this waste will be cytotoxic, including drugs and syringes. We are talking about materials that are contaminated with faeces, infectious material and blood. We are discussing five sites across England. HES also has two sites in Scotland, both of which have been checked and do not have overstorage.

We hear that HES was served with 13 warning notices and two compliance notices over the past year. If that information was not accelerated up to the Department of Health, should it have been? HES says that it has been reporting its issue with incineration to regulators for quite a long time, yet the Minister says that there is no issue of capacity, so could not the Department have responded by directing HES to all this extra incineration capacity that apparently exists? As more local authorities are going towards zero-waste and incinerating material that would have been in landfill, the pressure will increase. There is probably ageing infrastructure and a need to expand, so do the Government plan a waste incineration strategy?
Stephen Barclay: The hon. Lady is absolutely right that HES has sites in Scotland; I think there are four. The Scottish Environment Protection Agency has been conducting regular site inspections and we are looking closely at the situation there—not least regarding the movement of waste from one site to another. However, she is correct that we are not aware of any specific issues at those sites.

The primary purpose of enforcement notices has been to encourage the company back into compliance. That has been the focus of the Environment Agency. The reason for the partial suspension in Normanton has been the unwillingness of the company to respond. Some notices are for what might be seen as relatively minor issues such as documentation, but obviously some relate to the overstorage on these sites.

Rebecca Pow (Taunton Deane) (Con): I am pleased that new contracts have been signed and enforcement action has been taken—and quickly—but what is really important are the lessons learned, so will the Minister expand on that? While this is a sensitive matter—understandably, it evokes all kinds of concerns for the public—will the Minister assure us that there has been no risk to patients at any time or indeed to the wider public from this most concerning of issues?

Stephen Barclay: I am grateful to my hon. Friend for her question, and I am happy to give her constituents an assurance that there has been no risk to patients at any point during this time. As for lessons learned, clearly we will need to look at some of the lessons, particularly what triggers a breach of contract. A series of contracts were held by a wide number of trusts with particular what triggers a breach of contract. A series of contracts were held by a wide number of trusts with the supplier, and it is important that we look at what the notification periods are, what the monitoring and enforcement processes are, and what powers there are under the terms of the contract to ensure that the company is acting as it should.

Yvette Cooper (Normanton, Pontefract and Castleford) (Lab): We still do not have the basic facts about what medical waste is being held at the Normanton site, how far over the environmental limits it currently is, and what the timetable is for compliance. Perhaps the Minister would share that information with us. Does he not accept that it is a basic principle that, when dealing with any kind of public health or environmental health risk or incident, proper, full, factual information is provided to the public and the community at the earliest possible opportunity? You do not hide behind contractual negotiations. Does he accept that there is nothing in the contract negotiations that would have prevented him or the Health Secretary from providing some basic facts about those risks much, much earlier than today?

Stephen Barclay: On the split to which the right hon. Lady referred between clinical waste and other waste at the Normanton site—she rightly focused on that for her constituents—just under a third of the flow of waste to the site is clinical. Just over two thirds, in my understanding, is non-clinical. It is not the case that all the waste on the Normanton site is clinical waste. As I have mentioned, some media reports about what the term “clinical waste” constitutes are slightly different from the reality.

As for notification, I set that out in my written ministerial statement and in my comments today. The key focus is on maintaining the continuity of operations and service within the NHS trusts so that we are not in a position where clinical waste cannot be cleared from them. That is the focus, and that is why, given the commercial negotiations and the contingency arrangements that have been put in place, we came to the House today, and not at an earlier point.

Mr Philip Hollobone (Kettering) (Con): In the end, the system has worked. There has been no back-up of clinical waste in hospitals—it has just been overstored in these sites. However, it is worrying, if it is true, that 13 warning notices and two compliance notices were issued to the company. Does the Minister think that he should be alerted earlier by the Environment Agency if this sort of thing happens in future?

Stephen Barclay: My hon. Friend makes a valid point about the lessons to be learned from this. Part of what I would expect to look at as we move forward are questions about when the NHS was first made aware of this and what powers are available to enforce at an earlier stage. As I have mentioned, enforcement notices cover a spectrum of risk. Some of those risks are more technical in nature than others, so while there have been 13 notices, their enforcement encompasses a range of severity.

Liz Kendall (Leicester West) (Lab): According to its most recent accounts, HES made a gross profit of over £15 million last year. What financial penalty will it suffer because of its gross incompetence?

Stephen Barclay: The first financial penalty it has suffered is the prompt action we took over the weekend, with 15 NHS trusts cancelling those contracts and moving across. There is a clear financial penalty in that loss of business. As for fines, that is a matter of legal process, through the Environment Agency, in the normal way. That is not an NHS matter. The focus for the NHS is on maintaining continuity of service.

Rachel Maclean (Redditch) (Con): The Minister will be aware that my constituents want to be assured that their operations in Redditch and Worcester will be able to continue as normal. Can he give them that assurance?

Stephen Barclay: Yes, I can.

Mary Creagh (Wakefield) (Lab): The Government like to talk tough on waste criminals, but here we have waste criminals storing 350 tonnes of clinical waste illegally—five times the amount to be compliant—at their site in Normanton, and despite the Minister being told about this on 31 July, neither the local MP nor constituents were informed. Cobra was informed. A criminal investigation is now under way into the company. Can he ensure that not a single acute hospital trust will lose one penny piece as a result of this criminal negligence?

Stephen Barclay: The hon. Lady raises several points. On the 350 tonnes of waste, I clarified the flow of that waste in my comments to the right hon. Member for Normanton, Pontefract and Castleford (Yvette Cooper) and I said that not all of it is clinical. I was not personally told on 31 July. I set out in my written statement when the NHS and then Ministers were told.
The question about whether there is any cost to NHS trusts is a very valid one for all constituency MPs who wish to understand the situation. The contingency cost—for example, from the additional capacity being put in place at trusts—will be borne centrally by the NHS family, and the cost of processing clinical waste will be borne by NHS trusts, as it has been to date.

Kevin Foster (Torbay) (Con): I welcome the action the Minister has taken to terminate the contracts with this company, given its clear breaches and failure to deliver what it said it would. In his statement, he referred to the capacity for clinical waste incineration. Can he give us further detail about how he satisfied himself that there is capacity in each region? Clearly, these are specialist facilities, and having to transport waste could have a knock-on effect.

Stephen Barclay: I should clarify that it is not me personally who has terminated these contracts. These contracts with HES are held by the trusts themselves, and therefore it is a decision taken by those trusts.

As I said earlier, there is significant additional capacity within the incinerator landscape to process the waste generated by this contract, and therefore the suggestion in some quarters that this is an issue of a lack of capacity is simply not valid. To be clear, HES produces 595 tonnes of waste a month that goes to incineration, and the NHS identified 2,269 tonnes of incineration capacity, so reports that there is a lack of capacity in the market are not valid.

Wes Streeting (Ilford North) (Lab): I learned from the Health Service Journal that Barking, Havering and Redbridge University Hospitals NHS Trust was one of those affected. It is totally unacceptable that clearly one of Ministers’ objectives was to cover things up for as long as possible to save their own blushes because of the failure of a Government contractor. Members of this House should not learn of such events from the media. We should hear it from Ministers via the Dispatch Box or the relevant Select Committee—or there is such a thing as email.

Ministers have announced that £1 million of contingency funding is to be made available to support trusts affected. Will that be met from existing departmental budgets, or will money be allocated by the Treasury? Further to the point made by my hon. Friend the Member for Leicester South, can he explain how come Cobra has met and this House has not been informed of it? This House should be informed about Cobra meetings as soon as possible after they are finished.

Maria Eagle (Garston and Halewood) (Lab): So far, the Minister appears to have been far more interested in contractual arrangements than in public accountability. Can he explain how come Cobra has met and this House has not been informed of it? This House should be informed about Cobra meetings as soon as possible after they are finished.

Stephen Barclay: I am not sure about the exact protocols for when Cobra should and should not be reported, but given that it usually deals with highly confidential matters, I would have thought that not every issue should necessarily be reported in the first instance. We have been focused not on contractual niceties, but on ensuring that the NHS continues to deliver first-class services. As I referred to earlier, this is the first opportunity we have had following the conference recess to notify the House, following the contractual arrangements being made.

Tom Pursglove (Corby) (Con): Will my hon. Friend confirm that the backlog of waste will be dealt with speedily, in accordance with the requirements of the law and with appropriate supervision?

Stephen Barclay: I very much share my hon. Friend’s desire for the backlog to be cleared as speedily as possible. As I referred to a moment ago, this is an area of scrutiny for the Environment Agency, and it is important that the company complies with its legal requirements and ensures that the level of waste is in line with its permits as soon as possible.

Nic Dakin (Scunthorpe) (Lab): Hospitals such as Scunthorpe general cannot run effectively without the safe and secure disposal of clinical waste, which is exactly why it is important that the Minister has made the comments that he has today. Northern Lincolnshire and Goole trust quite properly put in place local contingencies, because obviously it could not rely on things being sorted out. It now looks as though...
contingencies are sorted nationally, so can he be very clear that local trusts will not face a penny more of extra costs as a result?

Stephen Barclay: The hon. Gentleman raises a fair point, and I want to be clear about the distinction. Additional cost arising from the contingency arrangement—for example, putting in place extra storage on the trust’s sites—will not be an additional cost on the trust. I hope that that will reassure him, although I do not want to suggest to him that there will be no financial impact on trusts, because the requirement to clear clinical waste sits with the trust. That is why the trusts themselves had contracts with the supplier. The ongoing arrangements are likely to mean some increased cost, as the new supplier comes on board. That will fall to the trust, but not the contingency element.

**Government Overseas Aid Commitment: Private Investment**

4.39 pm

Kate Osamor (Edmonton) (Lab/Co-op) (*Urgent Question*): To ask the Secretary of State for International Development if she will make a statement on her plans to use private investment to make up part of the Government’s commitment to spend 0.7% of gross national income on overseas development aid.

The Secretary of State for International Development (Penny Mordaunt): Combined global investment flows into developing nations are currently $1.4 trillion, leaving a funding gap of over $2.5 trillion to deliver the global goals. With 12 years left on those goals, we are currently 80 years adrift on nutrition, 100 years adrift on education and 200 years adrift on ending extreme poverty. If we want to deliver those goals, we have to let others help, including the private sector.

We know that we have had good returns from our investments in developing nations—CDC manages an average annual return in sterling of 7%—so investing in developing nations could offer investors and pension holders a greater return on savings. We have £8 trillion under investment in the City of London. If 1% of that were redirected to Africa, that would lever $110 billion. Compare that with the total aid spend of $50 billion currently going into Africa. I believe that the public would be interested in their savings and pension funds helping this agenda to deliver the global goals. Imagine an app that allowed someone to select which particular goals they wanted their savings or pension fund to help.

We have the tools to do this. At the United Nations General Assembly a few weeks ago, we unveiled the World Benchmarking Alliance, which will grade companies’ performance against the global goals. We have the expertise to do this, in the City of London, in the Department for International Development, with our partners, and also through our world-beating impact investment organisations. We therefore want to explore doing this.

Today, I have announced a national conversation with financial institutions, with savers, with pensioners and with the wider public. We will announce the results at a UK-Africa investment conference next year. This is the only way we will deliver the global goals. Over the past two years, we have also worked with our partners to shift the dial on international aid rules, allowing our aid budget to help the private sector invest in sustainable development more than ever before. I will continue to work with our partners at the Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development to ensure that the aid rules incentivise donors to lever in private sector investment where it is needed.

In future years, as the amount of funding coming back into our own development financial instruments—publicly owned financial instruments—increases, we should be open to using the profits to count towards the 0.7%. I am exploring the scope to reinvest those funds with the Development Assistance Committee to maximise the value of our investments. We remain committed to 0.7%—it was this Government who introduced it—but as we do so, we should ensure that the British public get a triple return on their generosity and compassion; a stronger personal return to them, a stronger Britain, and a more prosperous and secure world.
Kate Osamor: I thank you, Mr Speaker, for granting this urgent question and the Secretary of State for being here. This country’s commitment to spend 0.7% of our national income on overseas aid is a clear expression of how deeply the UK public care about eradicating poverty overseas. The public are therefore right to feel betrayed by the Secretary of State’s speech today, in which she has suggested that global poverty can be utilised as a lucrative investment opportunity. It is deeply concerning to learn of her plans to redefine aid through today’s media reports.

As the rules that govern aid spending are set at an international level by the OECD, can the Secretary of State tell us what precise rules she wants to change? In the absence of any detail, we can only speculate on how she believes these new investments will help the world’s poorest. Her claim that private investment is a win-win is not based on the evidence. We all know that there are both winners and losers from foreign investment in the global south. Her vision will leave the most vulnerable people at the mercy of global markets.

Does the Secretary of State recognise that her approach will mean major development issues that are not considered profitable will no longer get the funding they need? The press report that this private investment will replace public contributions to the UK’s aid budget. Will she confirm whether this is indeed her plan? I think the public deserve to know.

Penny Mordaunt: I gave a lengthy speech this morning and there is plenty of detail in there. [Interruption.] It is online, so the hon. Lady can read it.

Let me be very clear about the rule changes we would explore. Currently, when we capitalise an investment instrument, we count it as official development assistance. When we make the investment, we do not. We are very happy with that—we have argued for it—and that is what happens now. In future years, however, once we have capitalised those instruments, we may wish to change the way we do it. [Interruption.] It is not double-counting; it is allowing the returns we make on those investments to be used more flexibly. We are very happy and it suits us at the moment to do this. The issue is that if we then reinvest those funds in development, they do not count towards the 0.7%, and if we take them out, to spend on the NHS or another domestic priority, it counts negatively. What we are arguing for is exploring, at this stage, changing the rules to allow us to do that.

In addition, we have to accept that, even with the combined total of our budget and those of other nations, we will not deliver the global goals unless we let the private sector do more. Currently, the £8 trillion in the City could be put to better use and may actually deliver higher returns for pension funds. They will do a huge amount of good in the developing world.

The hon. Lady asks me for examples. CDC, which I understand she wishes to abolish, is the oldest development financial institution in the world. Last year, it made investments of over £1 billion, which created 735,000 jobs. We need to create 18 million jobs every year until 2035 just to keep up with population growth in Africa, and that is what we need to do to eradicate extreme poverty. If the hon. Lady has a better suggestion on how to raise $2.5 trillion I would be very interested to hear it.

I am here not to make us feel good about spending aid money; I am here to eradicate extreme poverty. We cannot do that without business and we cannot do that without the private sector. Dogma has no place in this debate.

Sir Desmond Swayne (New Forest West) (Con): If we are to avoid a growing army of underemployed, desperate and angry young people, we need 600 million new jobs over the next decade. Does the Secretary of State imagine that can be provided without an enormous mobilisation of private sector investment in the developing world?

Penny Mordaunt: My right hon. Friend is right. We are entering into the final decade and the last push towards the global goals. We have to be realistic. If we are going to achieve them, and I want to achieve them, we have to let other people help.

Patrick Grady (Glasgow North) (SNP): It is disappointing that this has had to be an urgent question and not a statement and that it has been made while the International Development Committee is travelling, which is why I am standing here and not my hon. Friend the Member for Dundee West (Chris Law).

It is also disappointing in terms of the impact of this announcement. For many years, despite everything else going on, there has been cross-party consensus and huge public support for the delivery of the 0.7% target through public funds. The UK is supposed to be a world leader in this area. This kind of back-peddling and backsliding, and finding different ways to leverage the 0.7%, actually risks undermining that global leadership, which I thought was supposed to be a Government priority in the face of Brexit.

Does the Secretary of State accept that meeting the global goals is in our interests of building a safer, more sustainable and secure world? They are not things that just happen elsewhere in poor countries overseas; they are for everybody’s benefit. Why not be more ambitious and use this money to go beyond the 0.7% target, which is what the Scottish National party proposed in our White Paper on independence? Will she confirm that she is committed to retaining that target in one shape or form? The Government are already double counting money spent to defence, and this is simply more of the same. If there is going to be an app that lets us choose how money is spent, when can I go on to it and choose to have my tax money spent on not Trident but on aid instead?

Penny Mordaunt: I thank the hon. Gentleman for those questions, but I think he is a little confused about what the 0.7% is. It is not possible to count private investment towards that figure, so a pension fund down the road cannot count towards that 0.7%, but public funds can. The Development Assistance Committee measures many things, including private sector investment, but the 0.7% is public money.

If a future Government wished to, they could spend more than 0.7%, and we are committed to spend at least that amount of money. They could do so by counting the returns that were made. At the moment, we are spending more than 0.7% because we cannot do anything other than that with these funds—they do not count towards the 0.7%. We need to get the balance right between our commitments in this agenda, which are world leading—we introduced them and we believe in
them—and the demands we make of the British taxpayer. If in future years we can meet 0.7% without having to ask the British taxpayer for more money, that is an option we should explore.

Sir David Evennett (Bexleyheath and Crayford) (Con): As the UK leaves the EU, does my right hon. Friend agree that it remains in our national interest to continue to tackle these global challenges, including migration, humanitarian crises, peace work and security, but that we also need to maximise the effectiveness of our overseas aid?

Penny Mordaunt: My right hon. Friend is right. We have the opportunity to look in future years at what we might do with the £1.5 billion that we channel into the EU. I have set out very clearly that we would like to continue to work with our European partners. If that is done through the EU, we would have to ensure that they do not discriminate against British non-governmental organisations, and I have outlined both before the Select Committee and in my speech today how we would protect British NGOs and their beneficiaries in such circumstances.

Luciana Berger (Liverpool, Wavertree) (Lab/Co-op): Does the Secretary of State stand by the unnamed briefing to newspapers done today on her behalf, which stated that “when investors step in, the taxpayer can step back”?

Does she think there is any interpretation of such a statement other than that she intends to reside from this country’s honourable commitment to spend 0.7% on development?

Penny Mordaunt: I and my staff—both my political staff and my DFID staff—did not brief that. What I can say is that if we can lift people out of poverty, which we need the private sector to do, as they are the ones who can create jobs and close that enormous funding gap on the global goals, I hope that in future years we will be able to spend less money on these things, because there will not be the need. But that lies many years ahead. There will always be a need for humanitarian aid, but we have made huge progress over the past few decades in lifting people out of poverty, and I want us to finish the job in Africa.

Luke Graham (Ochil and South Perthshire) (Con): I welcome the comments from the Secretary of State on her commitment to the 0.7% target. Will she reassure the House that it remains a mission of this House and this Government to tackle the global challenges of climate change, humanitarian crises and economic development?

Penny Mordaunt: I absolutely can. That is why I am saying to the House, to the City and to our fellow donor nations that we have to start leveraging in others to help us with this agenda. If we really want to develop the global goals—we have been talking about the billions to trillions agenda for a very long time—we need to start delivering on it. Today, I have set out how we will start to do that.

Janet Daby (Lewisham East) (Lab): What steps is the Secretary of State taking to allow Parliament properly to scrutinise private investments in developing countries to ensure that they have a positive development impact on poorer countries?

Penny Mordaunt: I hope that the hon. Lady will welcome the announcement that was made at the UN General Assembly and that I reiterated in my speech today. For the first time, we have a tool that allows us to see how companies are graded against the delivery of the global goals—to see what they are doing socially and environmentally to ensure that the global goals are met. The benchmarking alliance unveiled at UNGA will be a huge tool not just for Parliaments and investors, but for the public, who, I think, care very much about how their savings and pensions are invested.

Nick Herbert (Arundel and South Downs) (Con): My right hon. Friend is surely right to focus on the need to increase private sector investment in developing countries. However big the aid budget is, it will be dwarfed by private sector trade and investment flows, which are essential. Does she agree that aid is particularly important where private sector investment fails—for instance, in the development of new drugs that are essential to beat diseases such as tuberculosis?

Penny Mordaunt: I absolutely agree. The more we can help others to lean in and assist with job creation, the more we can do on areas that only we can deal with, particularly health and humanitarian matters.

Tom Brake (Carshalton and Wallington) (LD): I am not sure whether this was the Secretary of State’s intention, but most of the press coverage about her speech this morning seemed to suggest that it was a leadership bid. On the subject of CDC—which, as I understand it, lost £73 million last year—can she confirm that she understands the concerns about CDC’s investment in things such as shopping centres, which may not deliver the best bang for our buck in terms of aid?

Penny Mordaunt: As I mentioned, CDC has a long history. It has been around for 70 years, and over that time it has done many things. One of my right hon. Friends, a former Secretary of State, got CDC to change how it focused its investments. It is focused now on the poorest countries, and on Africa in particular, which is where the heavy lifting is still to be done. CDC still has some legacy investments in places such as Latin America and so forth, but it is primarily concerned with Africa. We need to dispel some of the myths about investing in such countries. We get good and very competitive returns on those investments, and I urge financial institutions and investors to look at the opportunities that exist in Africa and Asia.

Leo Docherty (Aldershot) (Con): I commend the Secretary of State on her speech today. Can she confirm that she believes, as I do, that it is right and proper for our aid budget to support our national interest?

Penny Mordaunt: I set a new, higher spending bar for the Department, because in addition to spending money well, we have a duty to ensure that it could not be spent better. That means ensuring that we are doing the right thing within the development world and doing the best we can with that budget to improve health and education, but we also need to look across to our domestic priorities. If we are as explicit as we can be about the benefits to the British public of what we are doing in aid—for example, research that we have done has led to new treatments that are being used today on our NHS wards—I think the public will be pleased with that.
Mary Creagh (Wakefield) (Lab): The global goals seek to end poverty,  
violence and hunger in all their forms in this country as well as overseas. 
The figure of 0.7% of gross national income on development assistance should be a floor, not a ceiling. Although I have some sympathy with the accounting issues that the Secretary of State is dealing with in terms of the reinvestment of any profits, I seek a guarantee from her that any investments that we make with that budget—either through the World Bank or the Asia Infrastructure Investment Bank—are climate-neutral and environmentally friendly. I also say to her that not a single pension trustee in the country will invest overseas if they think that their investment is going to displace Government investment.

Penny Mordaunt: I thank the hon. Lady for her understanding of the issue of how we account for ODA. I can reassure her: this is the Government who introduced the 0.7%, and I have been an aid worker and believe in aid spending. I think that if we do not spend money on development, we pile costs on to other areas of public spending such as defence. I can also reassure the hon. Lady that the speech that I made today—I urge her to read it, if she has not already done so—makes it clear that we want to do more. Indeed, we must do more, because otherwise we will not deliver the global goals. So I can give the hon. Lady that guarantee. She is absolutely right: the public want to know where their investments are going. They want to know the environmental issues, and they want to know the social issues.

Rebecca Pow (Taunton Deane) (Con): Does my right hon. Friend agree that the aid budget should be used to encourage investment from new sources, which includes helping the British public to invest in companies that will invest in the global goals? Does she agree that in the light of the serious and desperately troubling climate change and global warming issues raised this week, it is more important than ever for us to adopt this funding model, because otherwise we will never address the carbon issues that we face?

Penny Mordaunt: My hon. Friend is absolutely right. I think that only one in five high-net-worth individuals invests in ethical businesses, and businesses that will help us to deliver the global goals. We must do more if we are to deliver those goals, and we want to explore how we can help them to happen.

Lloyd Russell-Moyle (Brighton, Kemptown) (Lab/Co-op): This morning, I searched in vain for any content in the Secretary of State’s leadership bid—I mean, her speech. The only content that I found was the statement that she was going to start a national conversation. Her party has only just successfully lobbied the OECD to change the rules to allow the billions invested in CDC to be counted as aid upfront, and now she says that she wants another change. May I, for the purpose of clarity, ask whether, if the Government have invested £1 in CDC and it recirculates two or three times, she counts that once as £1 from the Treasury, or counts it three, four, five, six times and puts herself on the back while reducing the 0.7%? Will she commit herself to the 0.7% as a floor and not a cap?

Penny Mordaunt: Let me reiterate that it is this Government who introduced the 0.7%.

Opposition Members have not read the speech that I made today—if they had, they would know that the thrust of it was about leveraging more in.

I agree with my hon. Friend and stand ready to receive other advice from the Opposition Benches about how we might close the £2.5 trillion funding gap—the shadow Home Secretary is not allowed to help with the maths. If we can deliver that through private investment, we can deliver the global goals. We must stop this dogma in the aid sector that anything done by the private sector is a bad thing; it is the only way we can actually deliver the goals.

Huw Merriman (Bexhill and Battle) (Con): I congratulate my right hon. Friend on injecting a big, cold dose of common sense and reality into how international aid might best be delivered. The poor, starving child in Africa who lives in a tin shack and whose parents do not have work does not really care whether it is the private sector or the public sector that delivers that aid, but if the involvement of the private sector means that that child is fed, his family housed and his parents employed, then bring it on.

Mr Philip Hollobone (Kettering) (Con): I congratulate my right hon. Friend on making a very clear case for the private sector and the benefit that we can get from many different sources helping to deliver aid. The greatest investment return, but on what will give the greatest humanitarian outcome?

Penny Mordaunt: Absolutely, and businesses are very interested in this agenda. They are interested in seeing how they can embed the global goals into their company reporting; there is huge demand for that, and for advice and support to enable them to do that. The possibilities are truly incredible, and we should support our entrepreneurs and those philanthropists who also want to donate, because they are another part of this issue with the potential that impact investing has. They want to do some good in this world, and we should support them to do that.

Wes Streeting (Ilford North) (Lab): The Prime Minister’s cuddly, compassionate Conservative pitch has not even lasted the first day back: not only have we just had a totally unnecessary and gratuitous attack on the shadow
Home Secretary from the International Development Secretary, but it is clear from the briefing that her speech this morning was a pitch to the right wing of the Conservative party as part of her leadership ambitions. The pitch is simple: we are going to roll in the private sector and roll back the state. That is what she has announced today, isn’t it?

**Penny Mordaunt:** I will circulate my speech to hon. Members.

Hon. Members must understand that ODA, the 0.7%, cannot be private funds; it can only be public funds—whether money Governments have put in or returns potentially from those funds in those publicly owned investment vehicles. The hon. Gentleman accuses me of playing to the gallery; I am sorry, but I think Opposition Members are doing that. I have not heard an Opposition Member stand up and defend good British business that wants to use its resources to help alleviate and eradicate poverty. We are behind that agenda, and I urge Opposition Members to get with it, too.

**Kevin Foster** (Torby) (Con): As the Secretary of State will know, hundreds of millions of people around the world have been brought out of extreme poverty by global trade and investment, so it is bizarre to hear it attacked today. Does she agree that proper aid policies, teamed up with sustainable investment and good trade, are the very thing that will deliver a vision for the future for many third-world countries, rather than a vision of Venezuela?

**Penny Mordaunt:** I agree with my hon. Friend. We have talked about distant investors and pension funds, but this is also about British entrepreneurs. I had a meeting with an entrepreneur this afternoon; he is a young gentleman who is setting up factories to produce clothing around the world. He is taking women who have been living on the streets and giving them a job, and other financial instruments, investing in Africa, separate from Government, including pension funds, have the potential to be used for years hence to count towards our aid.

**Rachel Maclean** (Redditch) (Con): Does my right hon. Friend welcome the fact that, as we leave the EU, we will be able to have additional control over the £1.5 billion within our international aid budget that we currently channel through the EU? Does she think that we could use that money to achieve the global development goals?

**Penny Mordaunt:** We have all sorts of choices ahead of us as we take back control of that money. I have outlined today that I think we should be doing more investment to create the jobs and livelihoods that these nations need to lift themselves out of poverty and to bring a return to the UK, so that we can make the work that we do more sustainable and, if we choose, increase it.

**Toby Perkins** (Chesterfield) (Lab): There is a legal duty under the International Development Act 2002 to ensure that aid spending is spent on poverty reduction overseas. There is also a responsibility on investors to maximise returns for their pension holders and shareholders. Those are probably contradictory priorities. Does the Secretary of State recognise that, if she is talking about this investment in terms of aid rather than of investment, she is going to have to change that legislation? Alternatively, is she talking about something entirely different from what we currently understand aid spending to be?

**Penny Mordaunt:** I refer the hon. Gentleman to the answer that I gave a moment ago. These are two different things, and I think many Opposition Members are confusing them. One reason why we are in the 0.7% club is that we do not mark our own homework; someone else does. That should provide some reassurance to people that we are not doing something that we are saying we are.

There is a difference when it comes to what a private company, entirely separate from Government, chooses to do—and what we are trying to encourage them to do: do some good in the world by investing in the developing nations that need investment and get a great return on their investment. There is a separate issue about what we do with public funds, which count towards the ODA spend. We are not talking about using private funds to replace that.

In terms of the Development Assistance Committee rules, we are talking about looking at how we count ODA, and about ensuring that when we get returns back we have more flexibility on what we do with them. We could spend more money on development or we could retain our 0.7% commitment and spend some of those returns on the national health service.

**Mr Speaker:** Order. I am grateful to the Secretary of State. I appreciate that it is sometimes convenient, not least within Government Departments, for Ministers to use shorthand, but for the avoidance of doubt and for the benefit of those attending to our proceedings who are not within the curtilage of the Chamber, I should point out that ODA refers not to an unpleasant smell but to overseas development assistance.
EU Exit Negotiations

5.14 pm

The Secretary of State for Exiting the European Union (Dominic Raab): With permission, Mr Speaker, I will update the House on the progress in the negotiations to leave the EU and on the Government’s planning for no deal. Since I last updated the House, our negotiations with the EU have continued and intensified, and we were engaging constructively with our EU counterparts over the recess break. Let me take the main areas of the negotiations in turn.

On the withdrawal agreement, while there remain some differences, we are closing in on workable solutions to all the key outstanding issues, building on the progress made during the summer on issues such as data and information, the treatment of ongoing police and judicial co-operation in criminal matters, and ongoing Union judicial and administrative procedures after the date of exit. We have also been discussing our proposals on the linkage needed between the withdrawal agreement and the future relationship, and the EU is engaging constructively.

On the Northern Ireland protocol, we remain committed to the undertakings we made in the joint report back in December to agree a backstop in case there is a delay between the end of the implementation period and the entry into force of the treaty on our future relationship. That was agreed to avoid any risk of a return to a hard border in the intervening period, but we will not accept anything that threatens the constitutional or economic integrity of the United Kingdom. Creating any form of customs border between Northern Ireland and the rest of the UK, which is what the EU had proposed, would put that at risk and that is unacceptable. As my right hon. Friend the Prime Minister said, it is not something she, nor any British Prime Minister, could agree to. We are engaging with the EU on our alternative proposals that preserve the integrity of the UK. They will be in line with the commitments we made back in December, including the commitment that no new regulatory barriers should be created between Northern Ireland and the rest of the UK unless the Northern Ireland Executive and Assembly agree.

On the future relationship, we continue to make progress on, for example, both the internal and external security arrangements for future co-operation, although there is still some way to go. As the House will know, the Prime Minister presented our proposals on the economic partnership to EU leaders at the informal Salzburg summit. We understand that the EU has raised some concerns, particularly around the distinction between goods and services under the common rulebook and with respect to the facilitated customs arrangement. We continue to engage constructively with the EU, and we continue to press our case. The UK’s White Paper proposals are the best way of ensuring that there is continued frictionless trade in goods after Britain leaves the EU while fulfilling the joint commitment to avoid a hard border between Northern Ireland and Ireland and respecting the referendum.

The negotiations were always bound to be tough in the final stretch. That is all the more reason why we should hold our nerve and stay resolute and focused, and I remain confident that we will reach a deal this autumn because that is still in the best interests of the United Kingdom and the European Union. It is the best way of protecting trade between Britain and the EU—trade which underpins jobs across the continent. It is the best way of ensuring that we continue to co-operate seamlessly on security matters and to tackle crime and terrorism to keep UK and EU citizens safe. It is also the best way to avoid a hard border in Northern Ireland that would adversely affect communities living there or separating Northern Ireland from Great Britain, which we will not countenance. To achieve those aims, the UK has brought forward serious and credible proposals. We continue to engage with the EU to press our case and to better understand the nature of their concerns. Equally, it is time for the EU to match the ambition and pragmatism that we have shown.

While we intensify our negotiations to secure the deal we want and expect, we are also expediting preparations for no deal in case the EU does not match the ambition and pragmatism that we have shown. As the Prime Minister stated on 21 September after the Salzburg summit, the Government have made it clear that we will unilaterally protect the rights of EU citizens in the UK in the event of no deal. To the 3 million here, we say, “You are our friends, our neighbours, our colleagues. We want you to stay.” We will set out the details as soon as is practical, and we now urge the EU and all its member states to step up and give UK citizens on the continent the same reassurances. It is time, on both sides, to provide all our citizens with that comfort and confidence.

Since I last updated the House in September, we have published 52 more technical notices in two further batches. They inform people, businesses and other key stakeholders of the steps they need to take if we do not reach a deal with the EU. They cover a wide range of sectors, building on other work that has taken place across Government over the past two years to prepare the UK for Brexit irrespective of the outcome of negotiations. They acknowledge that there are risks to a no deal scenario, but they also demonstrate the steps we will take to avoid, mitigate and manage any potential short-term risks and disruption. Overall, we have now published 77 technical notices, which form part of the sensible, proportionate measures we are taking to prepare the country for every eventuality.

Our most recent batch of technical notices were published on 24 September; they are set out in a written ministerial statement today. There are 24, and they range from aviation—the advice for airlines on the impact of no deal and the actions for them to consider to maintain services on the day we leave the EU—through to car insurance and the arrangements to ensure that green cards will be available free of charge from insurance companies to enable UK drivers to continue to drive on the continent. The publication of the technical notices enables further engagement as part of our no deal planning. For example, our earlier technical notice on VAT set out the VAT changes that companies will need to prepare when importing or exporting goods from the EU, when supplying services to the EU, or when interacting with EU VAT IT systems. It was welcomed by the British Chamber of Commerce, and we are grateful to them and all of our stakeholders for their constructive ongoing engagement on that necessary planning.
More broadly, on 17 September I met with the British Chamber of Commerce, the CBI, the Institute of Directors, the EEF and the Federation of Small Businesses, as part of the Government’s business advisory group, to make sure that we are explaining our negotiating proposals and no deal planning, and listening to UK businesses of all sizes and across all sectors. We will keep providing people and businesses with the advice that they need as we negotiate our exit from the European Union.

We also keep working with the devolved Administrations on all aspects of our planning for exit. I attended the Joint Ministerial Committee on 13 September. It has now met 12 times, and our last meeting was a valuable opportunity to give the devolved Administrations a full update on the negotiations, as well as to discuss the necessary no deal planning. We continue to listen very carefully to all their views. Mr Speaker, that is the way, with a concerted effort on all fronts, that we have put ourselves in the best position to make the very best of the negotiations, as well as to discuss the necessary no deal planning. We continue to listen very carefully to all their views. Mr Speaker, that is the way, with a concerted effort on all fronts, that we have put ourselves in the best position to make the very best of the negotiations, as well as to discuss the necessary no deal planning. We continue to listen very carefully to all their views. Mr Speaker, that is the way, with a concerted effort on all fronts, that we have put ourselves in the best position to make the very best of

Keir Starmer (Holborn and St Pancras) (Lab): I thank the Secretary of State for advance sight of his statement. It is always good to see him in his place, but may I politely point out that it would have been much better if this statement had come from the Prime Minister? It is no good hiding behind the badging of the Salzburg summit as informal. It was the Prime Minister who pushed for Brexit to be on the agenda at Salzburg; it was the Prime Minister who was there to lead the negotiations, and it was the Prime Minister who failed to secure a breakthrough. So it should be the Prime Minister, not the Secretary of State, in Parliament this afternoon explaining what went wrong.

After all, while the Prime Minister was negotiating in Salzburg, the Secretary of State was busy writing gimmicky letters to me about Labour policy. The image of the Secretary of State writing gimmicky letters on the very day of the Salzburg negotiations speaks absolutely for itself. It would also have been better if today’s statement contained details of substantive progress. Instead, it is like groundhog day. We get the same old story. The Secretary of State pretends that everything is going according to plan; it is just a question of dotting the i’s and crossing the t’s; everything will be all right in the end; and if it isn’t, we just crash out with no deal, stockpile food and medicines and declare that to be a great success.

I know that the Brexit Secretary will be tempted in reply to me to do what he usually does—to read out his pre-prepared attack lines about me and the Labour party. Can I urge him to resist that temptation and respond to the very serious questions to which this House and the country deserve answers? First, this Secretary of State repeatedly assured Parliament, including from that Dispatch Box, that a deal would be reached by the October Council—his words. Well, that is next week. The statement contains no such assurance today, so can he, first, update the House on when he now expects a deal to be put before Parliament?

Secondly, it is all very well the Secretary of State saying that we are “closing in on workable solutions” and listing the areas of agreement reached months ago, but we have been here before—many times—and that overlooks the fact that the remaining bit is the hard bit of agreeing the backstop in Northern Ireland. A solemn commitment to a legally binding backstop in Northern Ireland in all circumstances was made last December. Ten months later, all we are hearing is that the Government will publish updated proposals on the backstop at some unspecified date. There are nine days to go, so when will that be? There is no answer in today’s statement and we need an answer. Can the Secretary of State take the opportunity now to scotch rumours that the Government are not even intending to publish a backstop proposal by next week? [Interruption.] I am being repeatedly asked what I would do. I would happily swap sides at any stage, and a lot more progress would be made in the negotiations. [Interruption]

Mr Speaker: Order. I have had reason to say to you before, Mr Spencer, that I am quite worried about you. I always regarded you as a rather laid back, gentlemanly farmer, but you seem to have mutated into something altogether more vociferous and aggressive. I cannot believe it is what you are eating. Calm yourself, man!

Keir Starmer: On the backstop, it is being reported that the Government are now willing to accept an indefinite UK-wide customs union as part of the Northern Ireland backstop offer—of course, it will not actually be using the words “customs union”. So can the Secretary of State set the record straight: is a customs union now the Government policy, at least for the Northern Ireland backstop—yes or no?

Thirdly, the Secretary of State repeatedly told Parliament that the final deal this House votes on would include a “clear blueprint” for the future relationship with the EU. In recent days, the Government have been emphasising just how precise this will be, yet it is nowhere to be seen. The Chequers proposals have been widely rejected by the EU and by MPs from across this House, and there is growing concern now that the Government are heading for no deal, as recent warnings from businesses, including Toyota and BMW, underline. If it is not no deal, will it be a vague deal asking us to jump blindfolded into the unknown? Labour will not support that. So will he take this opportunity to rule out a vague or blind Brexit?

For all the warm words, the reality is this: the Government have had 18 months yet they have not even concluded the terms of the withdrawal agreement and they have barely started negotiating the details of the future relationship with the EU. A responsible Government would realise the fix they are in. Instead, this Government simply repeat the mantra, “It's Chequers or no deal.” It is not so much “nothing has changed” as “nothing can change”. This is not a necessity; this is a political choice, and it is deeply irresponsible. No Government have the right to plunge the country into chaos as a result of their own failure. Time is running out, but there is still time to change course, and I urge the Secretary of State to do so.

Dominic Raab: I thank the shadow Brexit Secretary—for his opening remarks at least. He asked a number of questions. First, let me say that the Prime Minister would not normally update the House on an informal summit; that was not the practice under the previous Labour Governments, as he probably well knows. He asked me about the October Council. We have always been clear that we would aim for the October Council but there would be leeway that it might slip into November—we are still clear on that. The October
Council next week will be an important milestone. We expect that to be a moment where we will make some progress. Of course, as I have said already in my remarks, we need the EU to match the ambition and the pragmatism that we have shown.

The shadow Secretary of State asked whether we were signing up to an indefinite customs union for Northern Ireland; no, that is categorically not correct.

Tony Lloyd (Rochdale) (Lab): So what are you doing?

Dominic Raab: Had the hon. Gentleman been paying attention, he would have heard me set that out clearly in my statement.

The shadow Secretary of State talked about investment into this country, so I was surprised that he did not welcome Rolls-Royce’s recent decision to increase its investment in the UK or Unilever’s decision to maintain its dual UK-Dutch structure.

The shadow Secretary of State referred to my letter asking him some of the most basic questions on Labour’s policy on the substance. He has almost become the prince of process: he argues about protocol and procedure but cannot answer a single question on the substance. In reality, we got some answers at the Labour party conference. We had the shadow Secretary of State saying that Labour would whip a vote against any deal outside the customs union that the United Kingdom strikes with the 27 EU member states. Let us be clear: if all 28 Governments agree on a deal that works for the UK and for the EU, the Labour Front-Bench team, at least, would vote against it—they would try to veto it.

Worse still, the leader of the Labour party, the right hon. Member for Islington North (Jeremy Corbyn)—I am glad that he is present to answer for this—has opened the door to a second referendum. That is a thinly veiled ruse to reverse Brexit altogether. It is now quite right to expect the EU to move in our direction. If the EU does match that ambition and pragmatism, I am confident that we can still reach a deal.

Peter Grant (Glenrothes) (SNP): I am grateful to the Secretary of State for the advance sight of his statement—both the advance copy of today’s statement, which I received a few hours ago, and the statement that he made on 4 September, which was basically an advance copy of today’s statement, because very little seems to have changed since then.

It was nice to spend some time listening to Ministers from a united, competent Government who very much have the citizens of their nations at heart and to listen to political disagreements being heard and debated in a respectful and consensual manner—but then I had to leave the Scottish National party conference early to come down here, and everything has changed.

We still do not know what the Government intend to propose to the European Union in respect of Northern Ireland. We know the litany of what they are not going to do—it has to be thrown over every time to keep the Democratic Unionist party on side—but we do not know what is being proposed on Northern Ireland. We are running out of time and need answers very quickly indeed.

There was a brief update on the EU’s response to the trade package in the Chequers proposal. The EU did not raise concerns about it, it said that it will not be acceptable to its member states. It is not going to happen. Chequers has been bounced. The Government should take it off the table and try again.

May I gently correct the Secretary of State and say that the single, simplest and easiest way to achieve everything that the Government say that they want to achieve through Brexit is to stay in the customs union? We welcome the progress and the commitments that have been made on citizens’ rights, but the rights of those citizens would never have been under threat had it not been for the unilateral decision to come out of the single market. If they are that worried about the rights of future generations of citizens, they should stay in the customs union.

As our chief negotiator, will the Secretary of State assure me that he now expects that, as with all international organisations, the EU will indeed move a little nearer to our position, just as we move a little nearer to its position as a matter of compromise? Will he reject as quite ridiculous the arguments from some quarters that we can resolve this serious international dispute by tearing up Chequers and moving even further away from the EU’s minimum requirements for anybody to have an open trading relationship with the continent?
What assessment have the Government made of the cost to every business in the UK of complying with the avalanche of technical advice that they are now being expected to follow? Has any assessment been made of that, and, if it has, will we be allowed to see it this time? Will the Secretary of State confirm that, whatever some who prop up this Government may tell him, peace in Northern Ireland is not expendable, it is sacrosanct and it is not negotiable under any circumstances whatever?

Will the Government reject once and for all the demands of the hard-line minority? Will they accept that it is now time to listen pragmatically and constructively to the compromises that were offered almost two years by the Scottish Government and to the compromises being offered by others in this House right now? Will he agree to talk to those who might have an answer before we all crash off the cliff edge together?

Dominic Raab: I thank the hon. Gentleman for his call for sensible and respectful debate and agree with him that every effort needs to be made to preserve our precious Union. One thing that is very clear in this House, notwithstanding all the differences that we have, is that we will not allow any proposals from the EU to draw a customs line down the Irish sea.

The hon. Gentleman asked about Northern Ireland and our proposals. Our White Paper proposals on the economic partnership will provide the long-term sustainable answer to this question. As well as preserving frictionless trade with our EU partners, they will, in the process, resolve the concerns around the Northern Irish border. At the same time, we remain committed to the joint report in December, which would be for a limited, finite and temporary backstop.

The hon. Gentleman also asked about economic analysis. That will be made available in time for the meaningful vote. Finally, he asked about staying in the single market and the customs union. The reality is, as he well knows, that if we stay members of the single market and the customs union, we would not be leaving the EU.

Mr Iain Duncan Smith (Chingford and Woodford Green) (Con): I am astonished that my right hon. Friend has written to his opposite number attacking Labour policy. Nobody here knows what Labour policy really is, so perhaps he can share those letters with us to help us understand it better.

Did my right hon. Friend read the recent paper by two former Northern Ireland Secretaries of State, Lord Trimble and my right hon. Friend’s predecessor, my right hon. Friend the Member for Haltemprice and Howden (Mr Davis), explaining how practical solutions are available right now to resolve any issues around having a hard border in Northern Ireland? If he read it, does he agree that that paper demonstrates that there is now no need for a backstop proposal?

Dominic Raab: I thank my right hon. Friend for his questions. The search for a Labour party policy on the EU and on Brexit continues, but on the reports that he mentioned—there have been various reports on the technical solution to Northern Ireland—they have provided very important, useful additional insights. The reality is that we have committed, on top of the technical solutions, to agree a legally binding backstop with the EU, but it will have to be temporary and it will have to meet the conditions that we have set out and that the Prime Minister repeated in her statement after the Salzburg summit.

Yvette Cooper (Normanton, Pontefract and Castleford) (Lab): The Secretary of State rightly ruled out a hard border in Northern Ireland and a customs border in the Irish sea, but is it not now time to be honest with people about what that means? He appeared to be ruling out a customs union in the backstop. Is he also ruling out a common external tariff in the Irish backstop—yes or no?

Dominic Raab: We have been very clear that the arrangement needs to be time-limited. We would not accept an arrangement that drew a customs border down the Irish sea. It needs to be limited so that we can bridge to the future relationship, which would give us all the advantages of free trade that we want to take
advantage of, including export opportunities from Latin America to Asia, and the reduction of the cost of living here at home.

John Redwood (Wokingham) (Con): Will my right hon. Friend confirm that if we just leave without signing a penal and one-sided withdrawal agreement, we will have £39 billion to spend on our priorities, which would be a huge boost to our economy and public services—a true Brexit bonus? How can an agreement be better than that?

Dominic Raab: My right hon. Friend is certainly right to point to the countervailing opportunities that a no deal scenario would have, but it is only responsible to be very clear—as we have in our 77 technical notices and our wider planning—that the no deal outcome is sub-optimal because there are risks and short-term disruptions, including a buffeting to the UK economy and all those other things. I am confident that we could get through that, but it is by far and away a superior outcome to get a good deal with the EU that is good for the UK and for the EU, that preserves our trade and security co-operation, and that at the same time liberates us to trade more energetically with the growth markets of the world.

Mr Ben Bradshaw (Exeter) (Lab): If the Tories want to know what Labour policy is, they should read the excellent motion that was passed recently at our party conference. Does the Secretary of State agree that any withdrawal agreement must include precise guarantees that Britain and the EU will enjoy frictionless trade in the event of Brexit, as the No. 10 Downing Street spokesman said yesterday?

Dominic Raab: The right hon. Gentleman will know that our proposals are set out very clearly in the White Paper. That is what we are pursuing. He is right to say that the negotiations have been tough, but you do not throw your hands up in despair; you knuckle down and hold your nerve. We will keep pursuing and pressing our case. What I cannot do is accept the case that the right hon. Gentleman makes for reversing the referendum. That would be a democratic outrage and it is not something that we will countenance.

Amber Rudd (Hastings and Rye) (Con): I welcome the deliberative approach to Brexit that protects businesses and endeavours to make sure that frictionless travel will continue across the board, but may I ask the Secretary of State what his plans are in the event of a no deal for security matters? I remain very concerned about the somewhat gung-ho approach to a no deal, given that security matters are not yet in place to ensure that our country remains safe from terrorists and from organised crime and that the EU has the same benefits from our efforts?

Dominic Raab: I thank my right hon. Friend for her remarks. I am confident that in the medium to long term we will resume all the kinds of co-operation that one would expect, but it is right that in a no deal scenario we could not rely on the EU continuing that in the short term. One thing that could be said is that in that scenario there would be countervailing opportunities, for example—she talked about security—preventive checks at the border and the ability to deport when we are beyond the free movement rules that we are bound by under the EU.

Luciana Berger (Liverpool, Wavertree) (Lab/Co-op): May I return to something that the Secretary of State said in response to my right hon. Friend the Member for Exeter (Mr Bradshaw), because he did not quite respond, and I think that it is an important point? Yesterday, we heard from a No. 10 spokesman that there must be “precise” guarantees that Britain and the EU will enjoy frictionless trade after Brexit. Will the Secretary of State confirm that those guarantees will be a condition in the withdrawal agreement?

Dominic Raab: I am not sure that I am going to allow or let the Opposition set conditions on the UK’s policy—[Interruption]—no, when it has been clearly set out in our White Paper. We want to pursue the frictionless trade with the EU that we have right now, and that is what our proposal will deliver, but it requires the EU to meet us halfway to match the ambition and pragmatism that we have shown.

Mr Owen Paterson (North Shropshire) (Con): If the backstop comes into operation, the UK will effectively be within the rules of the single market and the customs union and ultimately the European Court of Justice. Three times, the Secretary of State has said that that arrangement will be temporary, but it will be open-ended. What will be the exact legal process by which we will end this, and what will be the incentives for the EU to end this arrangement, as it is happily taking large sums of public money from the British taxpayer?

Dominic Raab: We have made it clear that it would be temporary and finite. The reassurance that I can give my right hon. Friend in advance of the publication of our proposals is that it is very difficult for the EU. From its perspective, there is a difference in the way in which customs union is described, because, for it, it would normally include free movement and the rules on that, which in the case of the backstop would not apply. There will be a lot of pressure on the EU, both legally and as a matter of policy, to end the backstop, and we will not agree to anything that does not include a clear process and steps to exit. [Interruption.] No, I am afraid that the right hon. Member for Islington South and Finsbury (Emily Thornberry) does not.

Nigel Dodds (Belfast North) (DUP): The idea that the sort of proposals that are floating about from the EU side and, indeed, some officials from our side in Brussels are necessary to prevent a hard border on the island of Ireland is complete rubbish. There is already infrastructure on the border, and there are financial, fiscal and other differences because it is an international border. Of course it can be managed.

May I draw the Secretary of State’s attention to what the Prime Minister said in her commitments to Northern Ireland on 6 December? She said that there would be no new borders within the United Kingdom and that the whole UK, including Northern Ireland, would leave the customs union and the single market. On 17 December, she agreed that nothing would be done to create any border, constitutional, political, economic or regulatory, between Northern Ireland and the rest of the United
Kingdom. Does the Secretary of State stand by that, because he needs to understand that, as a democratic Unionist party, we will not tolerate anything that separates Northern Ireland from the rest of the United Kingdom on customs or the single market as we leave the European Union? We have been clear about that from day one. It is why we had the debacle in December—let us not repeat that mistake.

Dominic Raab: I listened carefully to the right hon. Gentleman. He registered his position very clearly. We intend, as he knows, because we have been engaging on this issue, to honour all the commitments that we made in December, and we will not do anything that would be a threat to the economic or constitutional integrity of the United Kingdom.

Several hon. Members rose—

Mr Speaker: I am sorry to see the hon. Member for Harwich and North Essex (Sir Bernard Jenkin) looking mildly anguished.

Sir Bernard Jenkin (Harwich and North Essex) (Con) indicated dissent.

Mr Speaker: No? Well, I am heartened to hear it. We must hear from the voice of Harwich and North Essex, Sir Bernard Jenkin.

Sir Bernard Jenkin: I commend my right hon. Friend and the Government for being absolutely determined to avoid any new infrastructure at the Northern Ireland border. Can he explain what the Government’s policy will be if we leave the European Union with no deal, and therefore there is no backstop and we have a customs frontier? Will the Government implement the technical measures to maintain an invisible customs frontier? Will he rule out any new infrastructure at the border between the north and the south?

Dominic Raab: I thank my hon. Friend. Friend for his question. We have been clear that we will see no return to a hard border under any circumstances. That has been made clear to not just all parties in Northern Ireland but the Commission in Brussels.

Liz Kendall (Leicester West) (Lab): Let me try again, because the Brexit Secretary is trying to shimmy his way out of this. Yesterday, the Prime Minister’s spokesman said:

“There can be no withdrawal agreement without a precise future framework”

on trade. Is that true—yes or no?

Dominic Raab: True.

Sir Desmond Swayne (New Forest West) (Con): Any decision to exit a backstop agreement must be one for Her Majesty’s Government, is it not?

Dominic Raab: My right hon. Friend is absolutely right that we could not allow any third party—in this case, the EU—to have a lock on the process and that it could not last indefinitely.

Mr Chris Leslie (Nottingham East) (Lab/Co-op): I commend the Secretary of State for his frank answer to my hon. Friend the Member for Leicester West (Liz Kendall), because it sounded as though he was finally ruling out the notion of a blindfolded Brexit and the idea that there would not be precise guarantees of frictionless trade in the withdrawal treaty on the future relationship. When he brings the motion before the House, if that is exactly what is presented, will he make sure that we have full details about the trade relationship for the future?

Dominic Raab: First, there is no question of some kind of blindfolded Brexit. We will be agreeing the withdrawal agreement and the Northern Ireland protocol, and we want to make sure that we have enough detail and enough of the substance in the political declaration on the future relationship, so that this House and the country at large understand the model of economic and security co-operation that we will be pursuing.

Damian Green (Ashford) (Con): My right hon. Friend has rightly paid much attention to the Northern Ireland border, but may I draw his attention to other important borders—notably, the cross-channel border and all the trade that comes through Dover and the roads of Kent every day? Can he assure me that the deal he is looking for will ensure frictionless trade through the port of Dover, so that we avoid any kind of local chaos on the roads in Kent and wider economic chaos in the supply chains of the manufacturing industry throughout this country? That is a very important part of the negotiations.

Dominic Raab: I thank my right hon. Friend for his question. He is absolutely right that, as well as on the issue of Northern Ireland, our proposal is designed to guarantee frictionless trade—in particular, for manufacturing businesses that rely on those supply chains. That is a critical element of the White Paper proposals, which is why we are pressing it so hard.

Stephen Kinnock (Aberavon) (Lab): The Secretary of State has said that the backstop has to be time-limited. Can he share with the House which particular date he has in mind and how he came to settle on that date?

Dominic Raab: We are not in a position yet to give a date. We will publish that when we publish the proposals in the round. What cannot be allowed to happen is for either Northern Ireland or the UK as a whole to linger in an indefinite limbo of the customs union.

Stephen Crabb (Preseli Pembrokeshire) (Con): The intransigence shown by the EU at Salzburg and some of the other antics there will have reminded every leave voter in the country and a great many others that leaving the EU is the right thing to do. How confident is my right hon. Friend that we will see an outbreak of the spirit of pragmatism that he spoke of earlier, to land a deal later this autumn?

Dominic Raab: I thank my right hon. Friend for his question. He is right in his summary of the Salzburg summit, but the thing to do in such a negotiation is to keep your cool, hold your nerve and keep doing the professional, statesman-like thing, which is exactly what our Prime Minister has done. In terms of our confidence in reaching a deal, we cannot control the other side, but I think that the prognosis is good, because it is in the EU’s interests just as much as the UK’s interests to get a strong deal on everything from trade to security co-operation, to secure livelihoods and jobs on both sides and, in particular, to keep UK and EU citizens safe.
Wera Hobhouse (Bath) (LD): At the heart of the Brexit promise was that we could gain full control and free ourselves from EU institutions and regulations, while maintaining the same economic prosperity we have enjoyed during 40 years of membership. Is it not time to come clean that both simultaneously are not possible? There is a choice: we can choose Brexit, or we can choose prosperity.

Dominic Raab: No, I do not accept that sort of binary choice. The one thing we must all do in this House, as democrats, is respect the result of the referendum. We are seeking to achieve the win-win of retaining our strong trading and security links and co-operation with our EU partners and being free to not just take back control of our own laws but trade more liberally with the growth markets of the future, from Latin America to Asia.

Mr Steve Baker (Wycombe) (Con): Time and again, customs experts from a range of countries in the EU, including Holland and Ireland, tell us that a free trade agreement can be made to work across the Irish border using pragmatic arrangements. When will the Government take the key that has been handed to them in the prison of this negotiation and admit that we can leave on an FTA basis, which would make this a proper, independent country, able to control its domestic regulations as well as its tariffs, so that we can lead the world into a new era of free trade?

Dominic Raab: I respect my hon. Friend and, as ever, I pay tribute to the work he has done, but he will know, because he was in government—indeed, in DEF— at the time, that while it may be theoretically possible for us to do that, we cannot do it and have a deal with the EU. The EU is not offering us a Canada or super-Canada FTA without our keeping to the commitment we made when he was in government in December to come up with a legally binding backstop. That is a shortcut to no outcome is forced on us, but the optimum aim and with a legally binding backstop. That is a shortcut to no.

Mr Barry Sheerman (Huddersfield) (Lab/Co-op): Is the Secretary of State aware that I consider myself sent here to secure the health, welfare and future prosperity of my constituents and the people of our country? Is he aware that nothing he has said today has convinced me that we are not heading for a steep decline and a miserable future for our country and my constituents?

Dominic Raab: All I will say to the hon. Gentleman is that we are ambitious for our post-Brexit relationship with the EU. The economic news from the Bank of England on GDP accelerating in growth terms and rising real wages is important. This is the moment to go into these negotiations with some economic self-confidence and political ambition. If we do that, this country’s best days lie ahead.

Mr David Jones (Clwyd West) (Con): The Japanese Prime Minister recently declared that Japan would welcome the United Kingdom into the Trans-Pacific Partnership “with open arms”. Does my right hon. Friend agree that membership of the TPP is highly attractive and should be pursued? Does he also agree that membership of it is virtually impossible for so long as we remain part of the customs union?

Dominic Raab: My right hon. Friend makes a very important point. We want to pursue trade deals, whether with the US or Asia-Pacific countries, precisely because it is better than purely leaving on no deal and WTO terms. I certainly accept the premise and the assumption underlying his question, which is that we should not allow ourselves to remain in the customs union, because we would then avoid all the opportunities of Brexit that we need to grasp.

Alison McGovern (Wirral South) (Lab): My constituents are worried about the political declaration to come from the Secretary of State, because so far all they have heard is warm words and political rhetoric, which does not guarantee their jobs. I want to ask him a simple question. Can he define “frictionless”?

Dominic Raab: I have listened to the hon. Lady in these debates, and she always makes sensible and constructive arguments, but we have not just given warm words. We have set out in our White Paper, which is 100 pages long, detailed proposals on the frictionless trade that she refers to and on security co-operation. If she wants to give her constituents some reassurance, she can point to that.

Dr Sarah Wollaston (Totnes) (Con): The Secretary of State will have heard the clear intention of many colleagues on our Benches to vote down the Prime Minister’s pragmatic deal. Meanwhile, the clock ticks down to 29 March and there is a serious risk that we could crash out with no deal and no transition. The consequences of that would be disastrous and very different from the dodgy prospectus that was set out in the referendum. Particularly if that is the case, will the Secretary of State commit to giving the British people the opportunity to give their informed consent to that final deal? It is not about obstructing the referendum; it is checking that we have informed consent, and no decent surgeon would proceed without it.

Dominic Raab: I certainly agree with my hon. Friend about the need to pursue a good deal with the EU, and all our efforts are focused on achieving that. I do not accept the premise of her suggestion of a second referendum. I think it would inevitably be aimed at trying to reverse Brexit, and that would create democratic outrage and a huge amount of mistrust in the establishment and the political system.

Jonathan Edwards (Carmarthen East and Dinefwr) (PC): The Secretary of State mentioned the Joint Ministerial Committee in his statement. An issue of huge importance to Wales is post-Brexit cohesion funding. Following Salzburg, the Prime Minister seemed to indicate that the proposed shared prosperity fund would be the sole responsibility of the British Government. As he knows, economic development is a devolved issue, but the indication seems to be that it would be clawed back by Westminster. Is it not now clear that, for Wales, Brexit means the complete opposite of taking back control?

Dominic Raab: I thank the hon. Gentleman for his question. It is important to ensure that Brexit works for all parts of the United Kingdom. We continue to engage
Mr Peter Bone: I thank the excellent Secretary of State for coming to the House to make this statement. Obviously he would like to get a Chequers deal, but as the European Union has already rejected that—in some ways insulting the Prime Minister in the process, I have to say—and as he thinks that coming out without a deal is sub-optimal, should we not learn from a former great Labour Prime Minister about a third way? Labour Members didn’t cheer that point; I do not know why. If Chequers fails, is not Chequers-plus-plus-plus-the way forward?

Dominic Raab: My hon. Friend knows that we have made it clear that we will listen to the other side, but we need to understand their objections. We are not going to just take the face-value, “computer says no” approach, when we have put in a huge amount of effort and looked at our proposals in a very innovative way. We will therefore continue to press our case to make sure that we get a good deal, but I hope that my hon. Friend agrees with me that, whatever the view on no deal, it would be a far better outcome for this country if we can secure a good deal, and that is what we are aiming for.

Mr Pat McFadden: The Prime Minister has said that a Canada-style free trade agreement is nowhere near good enough for the United Kingdom. Does the Secretary of State agree?

Dominic Raab: I think we should be aiming for the best possible outcome. Our White Paper proposals give us that, and one of the crucial things we need to disabuse people of is the illusion that the EU is offering us CETA-plus or anything else without the legally binding backstop. That is what we are focused on achieving.

Vicky Ford: Many jobs rely on getting a free trade deal and frictionless trade, but such a trade deal also relies on fair competition between both parties. May I urge the Secretary of State to continue to reassure those in Europe that this country will not lead a race to the bottom in environmental standards, consumer standards or welfare standards, and that this Government are committed to fair competition?

Dominic Raab: My hon. Friend is absolutely right; we want to make sure that we have a pro-competition regime at home. As she will know, in our White Paper we have set out reassurances on a level playing field, and they come as a package with the Chequers deal, so we have also been clear with the EU that there cannot be any cherry picking from the proposals that we have put forward.

Steve McCabe: The Secretary of State said in his conference speech that he would rather leave with no deal than negotiate any form of deal that involved a customs union. Did he run that past the management at Jaguar Land Rover? How does he think the poor workers at JLR, now enjoying a three-day week and a two-week total shutdown, will respond to such a stubborn, intransient attitude?

Dominic Raab: JLR wants the deal that we are pursuing through our White Paper proposals. What it certainly does not want is all the extra additional uncertainty of a second referendum, which the leader of the Labour party has now exposed it to.

Charlie Elphicke: Representing the port of Dover, I have given the situation a lot of thought. The reality is that a Canada-style deal could work and could be made to work in a frictionless way if we build on already existing juxtaposed controls, which enable frictionless movement with passport checking. We could do that for goods as well, to ensure that we have a Canada-style agreement and frictionless trade as well. Will the Secretary of State take that forward?

Dominic Raab: I always listen very carefully to my hon. Friend. He makes his case in a powerful way. I would still suggest to him that if we are looking for the right balance between making sure that we protect our precious Union, preserving our frictionless trade with the EU and also liberating the country to trade more energetically with the growth markets of the future, then the proposals that we have set out are the only credible plans that deliver on all those objectives. That is why we are pursuing them.

Stephen Doughty: In contrast to some of the suggestions coming from parts of the Government Benches about a minimalist free trade-style agreement, the director general of the CBI told the BBC recently that a minimalist agreement would introduce friction at borders, would not solve the Irish border question and would damage our supply chains. Will the Secretary of State say whether he agrees with the director general of the CBI and therefore rule that out as an option?

Dominic Raab: We cannot rule out leaving with no deal, because we do not have full control of the EU, but I addressed the CBI president’s committee recently, and the hon. Gentleman will know that the CBI is fully supportive and wants to see the Government’s approach as laid out in the White Paper proposals delivered. He should get behind that.

James Morris: I commend the Secretary of State for his approach to the negotiations, notwithstanding their difficulties. He talked about pragmatism. Businesses in my constituency and across the west midlands are very pragmatic, and the outcome that they want from these negotiations is our being able to do free trade deals around the world, to stimulate exports and improve our prosperity. Can he reassure me that that is still the centrepiece of what we are trying to achieve in these negotiations?

Dominic Raab: My hon. Friend is absolutely right, and he is also right to talk about the future opportunities for businesses. It is also right to say that an energetic, global free trade policy is good for consumers at home as well, because reducing prices eases the cost of living for low and middle-income families.
Alan Brown (Kilmarnock and Loudoun) (SNP): In his statement, the Secretary of State said that the Government are expediting their no deal preparations. He also referenced the technical notice on aviation, which advises airlines that they will need to secure permissions from the national authorities of each state they want to fly to, as well as authorisation from the European Aviation Safety Agency. Can he explain how telling airlines that they need to sort it out themselves is making preparations for a no deal?

Dominic Raab: The technical notices set out our proposals and all the actions that airlines and the aviation industry should take. We cannot control what the EU would do in a no deal scenario, but as it set out earlier this year, this is one area where it would envisage the EU would do in a no deal scenario, but as it set out a viation industry should take. We cannot control what proposals and all the actions that airlines and the aviation industry should take. W e cannot control what the rest of the world thinks we might remain in the world, as opposed to the EU, but for every minute that the rest of the world thinks we might remain in some sort of customs union or common external tariff alignment, the less interest they have in negotiating with us on future trade. When will the Government publish their version of the backstop?

Dominic Raab: My hon. Friend is right that we need to be clear in our approach. One of the advantages when we secure a deal, as I am confident we will do this autumn, and publish our political declaration is that we will be very clear about the course we are charting, particularly on retaining control over our tariffs, which will put us in a good position to deliver the free trade deals that will benefit his constituents.

Thangam Debbonaire (Bristol West) (Lab): Does the Secretary of State have an example of any other process so monumental for our constitution, for our way of life, and for our businesses, jobs, trade and environment, that has taken place over such a minute space of time? Will he not consider whether this is insufficient time for our businesses, universities, healthcare services and so on to prepare for what might turn out to be a no-deal Brexit?

Dominic Raab: The hon. Lady is right to point out that there are risks. We set out our plans, through our technical notices and through legislation, to mitigate, manage or avoid those risks. The referendum was held in 2016, so this has never been done in our lifetimes. The reassurance I can give her is that we will pursue as best we can the best deal with our EU friends and partners. The wrong thing to do now would be to open the door to a second referendum, with all the uncertainty that would bring. That is why the decision of Labour’s Front Benchers is so flawed.

Clive Efford (Eltham) (Lab): The Prime Minister’s entrance just before her speech at the Conservative party conference was one of the worst examples of restricted freedom of movement that we have seen since the referendum. Is the fact that she has restricted her freedom of movement that we have seen since the referendum. Is the fact that she has restricted her movement today by not coming to the House to make this statement a sign that Chequers is dead? Can the Secretary of State stand at the Dispatch Box and tell us that whatever we will be voting on will be based on Chequers?

Dominic Raab: My hon. Friend is absolutely right. Furthermore, when we passed the legislation, all parties on all sides agreed and stated that they would respect the outcome. Nothing fuels mistrust in the political system more than when politicians renege on commitments they have already made. That is likely only to fuel the kind of mistrust in the political system that we need to avoid.

Mr Marcus Fysh (Yeovil) (Con): My part of Somerset has one of the highest degrees of exports to the rest of the world, as opposed to the EU, but for every minute that the rest of the world thinks we might remain in some sort of customs union or common external tariff alignment, the less interest they have in negotiating with us on future trade. When will the Government publish their version of the backstop?
Mike Wood (Dudley South) (Con): I welcome the more positive language coming out of Brussels over the weekend, but does my right hon. Friend agree that, although warm words are all very well, it is time the EU matched that language with actual movement if we are to reach a mutually beneficial deal this autumn?

Dominic Raab: My hon. Friend is absolutely right. The time for warm words is over; now is the time for deeds, actions and political decisions. I am confident that we can get there, as I have said, if the EU matches the innovative approach that we have taken. The EU is often at its best when it is innovative, rather than do nothing and relying on dry legalism. If it can produce the political will to meet us halfway, I am confident that we can get a good deal, in the way he described.

Stephen Timms (East Ham) (Lab): When the Select Committee met Michel Barnier on 3 September, he set out four reasons why the EU could not accept the proposal on the facilitated customs arrangement and the common rulebook for goods. The Select Committee then published its evidence. Why, therefore, did the Prime Minister apparently not know when she went to Salzburg on 19 September that those key elements in her Chequers proposals had already been rejected by EU member states? It has been said that she was insulted, but she should have known that that was their position.

Dominic Raab: The right hon. Gentleman is right that the EU has at various points set out objections, some of which I do not believe stand up to scrutiny. For example, there is the distinction between goods and services that the EU takes in relation to Ukraine, so that is at least a precedent showing that it can do it if it wants to.

The reality is that if we are in a negotiation, having taken our time to work out plans and think them through, bearing in mind the equities and key interests on the EU side, we will not just throw our hands up in despair when one or other element of the EU says no. We will continue to press them, understanding the EU’s concerns better, as we have set out in our proposals, and make sure that we can deliver a good deal that works for the EU as well as for the UK.

Rachel Maclean (Redditch) (Con): In Redditch, we were fortunate enough to have a visit from the Leader of the Opposition recently. I was unable to attend, as I was busy seeing constituents in my surgery. If he had spoken to my constituents, as I do, he would have found that the vast majority do not support a second referendum, because they believe that it would undermine our democracy. Can the Secretary of State confirm for my constituents that he does not support a second referendum either?

Dominic Raab: I can happily confirm that neither I nor the Government support a second referendum. Of course, it would be a betrayal not just of my hon. Friend’s voters, but of all those who voted for Labour at the last election and who thought that the Labour party was serious about respecting the verdict in the referendum.

Lilian Greenwood (Nottingham South) (Lab): Manufacturing accounts for 12% of jobs in the east midlands, and thousands of them are dependent on just-in-time supply chains. Can the Secretary of State explain to workers at Toyota, Rolls-Royce and Bombardier, and to the thousands more working for their suppliers, how the “countervailing opportunities” of no deal could possibly compensate for the threat to their jobs? If he cannot, why is he prepared to contemplate leaving with no deal but not to contemplate remaining in the customs union?

Dominic Raab: Remaining in the customs union would not be giving effect to the referendum. The hon. Lady mentioned Rolls-Royce, which has just announced extra investment in its Goodwood plant in Sussex. Many businesses are saying that, regardless of Brexit, this country is an excellent place to come to and invest in, because of the skills and entrepreneurial creativity of our workforce and our people. I hope that she can have a little more confidence in the ability not only of her constituents but of the people of this country to make the best of the opportunities of Brexit.

Michael Tomlinson (Mid Dorset and North Poole) (Con): I welcome the Secretary of State’s statement, particularly his clarity and reassurance towards EU citizens living and working in this country. Contrast that clarity with the response from Labour’s Front Benchers, who have refused to set out what their party’s position is and are still facing both ways on the issue of a second referendum.

Dominic Raab: My hon. Friend is absolutely right. The Labour party has no clear or coherent position on any aspect of the substance. The Labour leader’s calling for a reversal of Brexit through a referendum is a betrayal of everyone who voted Labour at the last election.

Jack Dromey (Birmingham, Erdington) (Lab): Jaguar is on a three-day week and Land Rover’s Solihull plant is ceasing production for two weeks. The company, the workers and their union, Unite, are working together, but it is becoming ever more difficult. Will the Secretary of State rule out any deal that does not guarantee frictionless trade and access to the single market, which are vital to the future of the jewel in the crown of British manufacturing—automotive generally and Jaguar Land Rover in particular—and will he disown those on his side who, when faced with industry warnings about the potentially catastrophic consequences of a no-deal or hard Brexit, wrote them off, saying that they were “making it up”?

Dominic Raab: I agree that we need to listen to businesses. I explained in my oral statement the steps we are taking to make sure we listen to businesses in all sectors and of all sizes. That is an even stronger reason why the hon. Gentleman and other Opposition Members should get behind the Government’s approach. Through the White Paper we can guarantee frictionless trade with our EU partners, while expanding our global opportunities. The one thing that would cause more uncertainty for businesses is the prospect, dangled by the leadership of the Labour party, of a second referendum.

Andrew Bowie (West Aberdeenshire and Kincardine) (Con): We heard it here today: the Labour party is calling for a second referendum and the Scottish National party is calling for two second referendums. Does my
right hon. Friend not agree that while it has always been the case that only the Conservative party has any plan to take us out of the European Union, we are now the only party left in this place that respects the democratic will of the British people?

Dominic Raab: My hon. Friend is absolutely right. I do not know what Brenda in Bristol would think about all the proposals from the Opposition parties. The vast majority of the people in this country want to see unity of purpose and for us get the best deal. They are fed up with the political opportunism of those on the Opposition Benches.

Wes Streeting (Ilford North) (Lab): In reply to my hon. Friend the Member for Leicester West (Liz Kendall), the Secretary of State confirmed what the No. 10 spokesman said: there must be precise guarantees that Britain and the EU will enjoy frictionless trade after Brexit as a condition of the withdrawal agreement. The question is: does he agree with that position?

Dominic Raab: We made clear in our proposals, first in relation to the question that I answered, that we want to see a well detailed political declaration so that people, when they come to vote on the meaningful vote, have a clear idea of the direction of the economic model and the security model of co-operation. As the hon. Gentleman will know from our White Paper proposals, we are pursuing and aiming for frictionless trade. That is the point of signing up to a common rule book on goods and agri-food, and that is the reason for the facilitated customs arrangements. He should get behind those proposals.

Maggie Throup (Erewash) (Con): My constituents tell me that they are concerned about the Labour party’s hokey-cokey approach. They also tell me that they have had their people’s vote, in June 2016, and do not need or want a second one. Does the Secretary of State agree with my constituents?

Dominic Raab: They are absolutely right, as they proved by electing my hon. Friend to this place.

Debbie Abrahams (Oldham East and Saddleworth) (Lab): The Secretary of State mentioned that he is confident of reaching a withdrawal agreement in autumn. He also talked about a political declaration having a clear blueprint for a future relationship with the EU. When will the House be able to scrutinise both the withdrawal agreement and the blueprint, and what level of detail will they have?

Dominic Raab: I thank the hon. Lady for her very important question. The timeframe for scrutiny in this House and the other place is also very important. After the agreement has been reached in all the areas she describes, we will have a period where the documents are laid and a meaningful vote. After that, the legislation implementing the withdrawal agreement would be introduced.

Kevin Foster (Torbay) (Con): I refer the House to my entry in the Register of Members’ Financial Interests. There has rightly been a lot of focus on one of the land borders affected by the UK leaving the EU, but so far no questions about the second one—the one between Spain and Gibraltar. Will the Secretary of State outline how he is keeping in contact with the Government of Gibraltar on the process of negotiations and ensuring that their views are fully taken on board?

Dominic Raab: My hon. Friend is right. I met the Chief Minister recently. We are making sure that the Government of Gibraltar are fully involved and fully aware of all the negotiations. We have made good progress together in Madrid. The Under-Secretary of State for Exiting the European Union, my hon. Friend the Member for Worcester (Mr Walker), will be seeing him again next week.

Tonia Antoniazzi (Gower) (Lab): In a letter dated 23 August, the Health Secretary said: “based on the current cross-Government planning scenario we will ensure the UK has an additional six weeks supply of medicines” in the event of no deal. However, it was then reported in The Sun that on 8 September that Cabinet Ministers were to be warned of a 12-week disruption at the border in the event of no deal—twice as long as the Health Secretary was planning for. Will the Secretary of State clarify the Government’s current planning assumptions for the length of disruption at the UK border in the event of no deal?

Dominic Raab: May I give the hon. Lady a bit of reassurance? In both the technical notices and the letter the Health Secretary sent to stakeholders, that has been set out very clearly. I can also give her the reassurance that the stockpiling of medicines and vaccines is a standard part of UK planning in the way the Government engage with the pharmaceutical industry in lots of other areas.

Matt Warman (Boston and Skegness) (Con): In the course of the referendum campaign my constituents weighed up the arguments on behalf of the leave and remain campaigns and voted overwhelmingly to leave. Since then, there have been siren voices calling for a second referendum. I wonder if the Secretary of State has heard a single argument made since the referendum that was not been made before it, because I have not.

Dominic Raab: I think at the time, come the end of the referendum, everyone was looking forward to getting a conclusion to it, because it seemed to drag on forever and we had gone around the houses with all the different arguments. The country heard both sides, the claims and the counterclaims, and plenty of controversy. I do not think the people of this country are fools. They made their decision, they knew what they were doing and now it is time to leave.

Sammy Wilson (East Antrim) (DUP): We welcome the Secretary of State’s commitment that whatever form the backstop, which was foolishly agreed in December, takes, it will not include any customs or regulatory arrangements that treat Northern Ireland differently to the rest of the United Kingdom. However, we are concerned that he still sees the need for a backstop, albeit one limited in scope and time. Will he clarify for the House and for the people in Northern Ireland how such a backstop would be limited? What would it be limited to and how long would it be limited for? Can he also assure us that the comments made by Michel Barnier
this week, that Northern Ireland would have to be prohibited from taking part in any trade deals negotiated after Brexit, will not be the case?

Dominic Raab: I understand the points the right hon. Gentleman makes. He will have seen the statement made by the Prime Minister in the aftermath of the Salzburg summit. We have been very clear that the backstop would need to be a temporary and finite bridge to the future relationship, which would subsume and supersede the need for any backstop at all. Of course it cannot be right to have any distinction, in terms of customs regulation, for any one part of the UK. We proceed as one.

Assaults on Retail Workers (Offences)

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

6.27 pm

Alex Norris (Nottingham North) (Lab/Co-op): I beg to move,

That leave be given to bring in a Bill to make provision about offences when perpetrated against retail workers; to make certain offences aggravated when perpetrated against such workers in the course of their employment; and for connected purposes.

My reason for wanting to bring about the Bill is simple: to protect shop workers in the course of their jobs, recognising that they are working in the public interest. I will define that shortly. The Bill would mean that future assaults on workers in the retail sector are treated as aggravated assaults, and that the perpetrators of the violence we often see our shop workers subjected to will receive greater punishment. This protection would act to prevent further assaults and properly punish those who seek to behave in such a manner.

I have been asked quite a few times in recent days why I have singled out retail workers for the Bill. That, Mr Speaker, is because I believe they represent a very specific case. Over the years, Parliament has legislated for shops to regulate over 50 types of products, including cigarettes, alcohol, weaponry and acid, which is of course currently in the news. At the moment, we ask shop workers to act not just in the interests of businesses but in the public interest to make sure that the rest of us are safe. We perhaps do not even know that that is happening. In that moment, the shop worker is in a potential conflict situation. Like lots of us in this place, I have worked in a shop. I know that telling someone who is drunk that they cannot have anything more to drink, or someone who is probably the right age to buy a product but has not brought the right ID that they cannot purchase it, is quite a difficult thing to do. Every time that happens, it presents a potential flashpoint situation with the wrong individual. When researching this issue, I was shocked by the level of such flashpoints. The Union of Shop, Distributive and Allied Workers, USDAW, the shop workers’ union, says that shop workers are on the receiving end of 250 such violent situations each day, six involving knives and two involving guns. It behoves us to act.

Here are a couple of cases from my own constituency, kindly gathered by the Co-operative Group, which is, I know, 100% committed to protecting staff:

“A bloke entered the store and nicked some chocolate rice crispies and hid them under his jacket. The store manager approached him and asked him to return the food. This was when the bloke became aggressive. He threw the food at the manager and made a headbutting gesture to the manager and another colleague. Once he’d left the store, he pulled out a small knife and made a gesture towards the colleagues”.

Secondly:

“Another guy came into the store and filled a basket with 7 bottles of booze, he also hid one inside his jacket. On his way out, 5 colleagues cornered him and he left the store. He came back 10 minutes later to try again and pushed a colleague to the floor. When challenged, he also tried to hit her with the bottle but missed and the bottle broke on the floor. 3 other colleagues chased him, but he gave up and handed the bottles back. Whilst leaving, he threatened that he would be ‘back to do them in with a bottle’.”
Incidents of that nature are happening up and down the country in all our communities in high volume, with nearly 2,000 every single week.

I strongly believe that anyone who was assaulted while doing their job should be afforded all the protections of the law, but I believe that what sets retail workers apart is that they have been entrusted with an important civic responsibility that goes above and beyond their duties and responsibilities to their employer. We in this place, as a legislature, should be acutely aware of this, because we are the people who gave these workers these extra responsibilities. Effectively, we have asked them to police the law on the sale of alcohol, knives, glues and now acid on behalf of us all. We have asked them to step forward to protect society, and now we need to show them that we have their back while they do so.

It is also worth recognising that the retail sector is unrepresentative of the wider population that uses the shops. Nearly a third of retail employees are under 25 and nearly 60% of people working in this industry are women. That means we have a young and by no insignificant margin predominantly female workforce. In this place, we are often accused of being distant from the reality of the day-to-day-lives of the people we serve, and I think we have a really good chance with this Bill to show that that is not the case.

We have public support, too. The Co-operative party—I am a Co-op MP, of course—commissioned polling with Populus that showed that 85% of people, when asked, supported my proposal. That reflects how much people appreciate the work of retail workers and want to work free from the fear of violence. I pay tribute to USDAW for its years of campaigning on behalf of shop workers across the country, and to the Co-operative party and my 36 Labour and Co-operative colleagues who have fought so hard for these workers across the country. I feel I need to apologise in advance for being able to have only 11 sponsors, given that they all wanted to sponsor the Bill. We are proud to stand with USDAW, campaigning to take forward the proposals in my Bill.

This must go hand-in-hand with supporting new clause 1 to the Offensive Weapons Bill, tabled by my right hon. Friend the Member for Delyn (David Hanson), which is due to be debated on Monday. I am relatively new to this place, but it might be that the ten-minute rule Bill process might not be the best route to getting the change I want secured. It was the best path available to me at the time, which is why I took it, but we have a good opportunity on Monday to show that we get this and I hope that Members will take that chance.

I am glad that the Ministers are in their place, and I call on the Government to give this subject time. I know where this Bill will go next, and it might well get buried if it is passed today, but if we have the proper time to talk about this issue we could make a real difference.

I know that we support shop workers, and 80% of them believe that the law needs to be strengthened because they are worried about things at work. I think we should hear their call. Through this Bill, we can ensure that those individuals who seek to assault our hard-working retail staff face the appropriate consequences. This is not a party political or partisan issue. It is about protecting those people who support our day-to-day lives, in many cases without our even realising it. I asked Ministers and colleagues across the House to support the Bill. Doing so will help to protect thousands of each of our constituents and to fail to do so will risk the situation worsening. Within the past year, there has been a significant increase in the number of these violent offences that I have talked about. I believe that the Bill is based on our shared values of tolerance and that nobody should be subjected to violence in their place of work.

Question put and agreed to.

Ordered,

That Alex Norris, Luciana Berger, Anna Turley, Mr Chris Leslie, Lloyd Russell-Moyle, Tracy Brabin, Jo Platt, Mr Paul Sweeney, Preet Kaur Gill, Alex Sobel, Jim McMahon and Stella Creasy present the Bill.

Alex Norris accordingly presented the Bill.

Bill read the First time; to be read a Second time on Friday 23 November, and to be printed (Bill 270).
Backbench Business

Baby Loss Awareness Week

6.35 pm

Antoinette Sandbach (Eddisbury) (Con): I beg to move,

That this House has considered baby loss awareness week 2018.

I rise to open today’s debate on Baby Loss Awareness Week, and if you, Madam Deputy Speaker, or others wish to read the account of Fiona Crack and her husband about their daughter Willow that is on the BBC site today, you will understand why this debate has continuing endurance and relevance. I am also extremely grateful to my colleagues and the charities that have worked with us on the all-party parliamentary group on baby loss. I want to use my time to highlight some of the successes, to describe how we can ensure that we build on them and to mention a couple of areas where we must focus our efforts more closely as they have become areas of concern.

Looking back over the past year, I am proud of the higher profile of parental bereavement issues. Whereas before many people felt that they did not know how to approach the subject or what to say, we are increasingly seeing people coming forward and offering words of sympathy, kindness and condolence, and the 60 charities working in this field have produced an excellent video, which is available on YouTube under the title “Baby Loss Awareness Week”. Members of the public and anybody watching this debate can watch and see how to approach and discuss the subject.

This change has come about because of a slow and steady change in how we in this country treat those who have lost a child. All of those involved in Baby Loss Awareness Week can be proud of this change, from those of us in this place today to the fantastic charities and voluntary groups, such as Sands, the Lullaby Trust and the 60 other charities that have been involved in the initiative. In addition, doctors, nurses and midwives on the frontline have been changing attitudes during the past few years.

It is not just attitudes that have changed in the past year, but policy. I am delighted that the past year has seen two major policy shifts: the implementation of a pilot of the national bereavement care pathway; and the passage of the Parental Bereavement Act 2018 into law. I am sure that my hon. Friend the Member for Banbury (Victoria Prentis) will want to discuss that Act in more detail, and I pay tribute to my hon. Friend the Member for Thirsk and Malton (Kevin Hollinrake) for his able stewardship of this important legislation.

It is a huge change in advice and support. I think my hon. Friend the Member for Banbury (Victoria Prentis) will be talking about the less encouraging statistics for areas that have not been able to roll out the pathway.

It is not only parents but medical professionals who feel the difference. At the beginning of the pilot, medical professionals were interviewed and asked what was preventing the delivery of the best possible quality bereavement care. One said that “people were in their own little bubbles. There wasn’t much sharing, nothing was passed around as a standard.”

Medical staff also identified a lack of staff training, poor bereavement suite facilities, complex paperwork, long delays in getting post-mortem results back, staff not knowing how to communicate with parents about their loss, and different levels of awareness or knowledge between departments at the same hospital. The evaluation shows that significant progress is being made on a number of those concerns. Some 77% of the professionals who are aware of the pathway agree that, overall, bereavement care has improved in their NHS trust during the period of the pilot. That is something that our national health service can be really proud of, because it represents a significant change. Two thirds of professionals who are aware of the pathway agree that it has helped to raise the profile of effective bereavement care in their trust.

The proportion of health professionals who feel prepared and how this happened; I must have gone in about five times, looking forward to doing it again. I believe that the pathway provides healthcare professionals with detailed guidance, training programmes, staff resources and simplified paperwork so that they can provide high-quality bereavement care when families need it most.

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The testimony of one parent who was involved in the pilot says it all:

“There was a doctor who was really, really helpful with me. It was such a shock and took such a long time for me to process why and how this happened; I must have gone in about five times,
where she had to sit me down and tell me the same thing again and again. It was never too much trouble for her, and I needed that. Having patience with someone is really, really important—because you might have said it five or six times but I need you to say it again. She’s a doctor, she’s a very busy woman but she always made time to speak to me.”

This kind of care, and this kindness in care, is so important for parents in that position. They are going through the worst experience of their lives, and they are not always thinking straight. They are guaranteed to be sleep deprived and distraught. The kindness of a doctor or the concern of a midwife can be the first small building block on the road to recovery.

However, despite these successes and others, which I am sure colleagues from across the House will mention, we must continue with our work. In the most recent year for which figures are available, 5,500 babies were stillborn or died within 28 days of birth in the UK. Some of our European neighbours have managed to cut perinatal mortality rates by up to half, which shows there is still more to do. I welcome the Government’s target of halving perinatal mortality rates in the UK by 2025.

One thing I am becoming increasingly concerned about is the rising number of child death cases in hospitals. Although I am pleased that the light of transparency is being shone into these hospitals, I cannot help being concerned by the number of such cases in the last year. Shrewsbury and Telford Hospital NHS Trust has been the subject of horrific news, with the investigation into maternity care expanding to more than 100 cases. Likewise, in my own area, the Countess of Chester Hospital is the subject of a criminal investigation amid allegations that a member of medical staff was involved in 17 deaths and 15 non-fatal collapses. More broadly, a recent study found that the baby death rate was 10% higher than expected for a maternity unit.

Just last week, we saw the news from Wales that Cwm Taf University Health Board may have failed to properly investigate historical cases of stillbirth and neonatal deaths in its maternity units. I know that that case—the most recent—is devolved, and there will be things that the Minister cannot say while investigations are ongoing, but I would be grateful if he reassured the House about the Minister cannot say while investigations are ongoing, but I would be grateful if he reassured the House about the state of that case. I am sure colleagues from across the House will mention, and I certainly join the hon. Gentleman in praising his constituents’ work in memory of Tiger Lily. Let me also refer to the story of Fiona Crack and her daughter Willow. Fiona went to speak to the hon. Gentleman’s constituents, and there is a detailed account on the BBC’s website, highlighting the way in which they have turned a negative into a positive in commemorating the memory of Tiger Lily and the steps that they are taking to help other parents in their grief. I believe that they help with the memory boxes; I have a memory box at home, and I know how valuable that is.

I think that there has been a real upick and a real positive story to tell this year, given the policy wins that have come from the Government. We know that we must address these challenges, but we have come a huge way in the last three years, and we have won important changes in policy.

Members may be wondering what they can do to drive the changes that we need. First and foremost, they can join me in encouraging the Minister to fully fund the national bereavement care pathway into 2019-20, so that it is embedded and becomes the national standard for best practice. I hope that the Minister will have something to say about that when he winds up the debate. Secondly, Members on both sides of the House can engage with their local charities who help those who have lost a child, as, indeed, many of their constituents have. I know that many Members are present because of the work that their constituents have done, or because of their own experiences.

Members can also help to promote the national bereavement care pathway in their constituencies. We have seen from the pilot that it works, but political support and public awareness are crucial to ensuring that it is embedded throughout the UK. If Members leave this debate with one thing in their minds, let it be the testimony of a grieving parent who experienced the pathway:

“I was shocked at the level of care. I thought ‘this is the NHS, why are they making such an effort for me?’ I didn’t know care like this existed and I was blown away by it—my expectations were exceeded in every way’.”
We have all benefited from amazing care from our NHS, but sometimes it does not have all the tools that it needs. The national bereavement care pathway gives it the tools that it needs to deal with this very difficult issue, and we must work to ensure that it is put in place throughout the country.

6.52 pm

Ben Lake (Ceredigion) (PC): Let me begin by expressing my admiration for the hon. Member for Eddisbury (Antoinette Sandbach), who made such a powerful contribution to the debate and, in particular, for her personification of bravery when recounting what can only have been a painfully traumatic experience.

I speak as someone who has not lost a child and who, as such, cannot begin to imagine how harrowing, how devastating, such a loss must be. I cannot begin to understand what it feels like to have enjoyed the exhilaration of expecting a new addition to the family and the months of anticipation and preparation, and then to be deprived of such joy.

As a society, we must strive to reduce the UK stillbirth rate, which remains high in comparison with those of other wealthy countries. There is also a disparity within the United Kingdom that needs to be acknowledged: Wales still has the highest stillbirth rate, at 4.44 per 1,000 births. Others who are present this evening will have far greater experience and expertise than I—so I will keep my remarks brief—but it appears to me that a range of measures will be needed to reduce our rate significantly. For example, researchers from the University of Edinburgh have recently discovered that introducing a package of care when women report a change in foetal movements can help to reduce the stillbirth rate slightly. Raising awareness among expectant mothers is important, but we should also ensure that training for frontline maternity professionals is not only available but prioritised, so that they are best able to react to any change in movements reported by mothers. Training and resources must be made available to maternity units so that they can act promptly when necessary.

As I am sure will be mentioned later this evening, hand in hand with greater awareness of changes in foetal movement is the potential for an enhanced programme of ultrasound scanning into the third trimester—which occurs elsewhere in Europe—to measure a baby’s growth more effectively, potentially reduce the number of adverse perinatal outcomes caused by foetal growth restriction and prevent avoidable deaths. This is, of course, at the heart of the debate: the desire to make lifelong memories—and I thank the charity Cariad Angel Gowns for enabling that to happen for Clare and Gareth.

The couple have climbed Snowdon to help raise money for the cots and to raise awareness of the causes of perinatal loss. Close friends completed the Cardiff half-marathon this weekend in memory of Mari-Leisa Jên. At a time of unimaginable grief, when most would understandably retire into themselves, Clare and Gareth have thought of helping others and, to date, have raised thousands of pounds. Such incredible resilience speaks for the strength and depth of their love for Mari-Leisa, and although her time with us was all too brief, the impact that she has had on family, friends and the local community is second to none. Mari-Leisa fach has brought them together to make a positive difference for others, and I, for one, cannot think of a more loving or a more worthy legacy.

6.57 pm

Victoria Prentis (Banbury) (Con): Thank you for letting me speak early in the debate, Madam Deputy Speaker. I should start by apologising for the fact that I have an unbreakable commitment elsewhere and have to leave before the end of the debate. It is the debate that I dread most during the year, but it is also one of which I am determined to be part.

It is a great honour to follow both the Members who have spoken so far, to speak in a debate that marks the beginning of Baby Loss Awareness Week and to serve as vice-chair of the merry band—largely—of people who form the all-party parliamentary group. We have been brought together by horrific circumstances, but we have had extraordinary success. There are hundreds of all-party parliamentary groups, perhaps even 1,000, but very few can boast the success that we have had in the past three years. We have really put baby loss on the agenda, and we have changed the law on, for example, parental bereavement leave.

Kevin Hollinrake (Thirsk and Malton) (Con): Hear, hear.

Victoria Prentis: I gesticulate at my hon. Friend, who has joined us so enthusiastically in championing that issue.

We would not be where we are today were it not for the support that we have received from the Government, especially the Ministers in the Department of Health and Social Care, and, indeed, the hard work of the charities that work with us. This year is particularly special for Sands, which is celebrating its 40th anniversary. I am very proud of my constituent Karen Hancox, who has worked so hard for Sands in Oxfordshire since losing her first daughter, Kayleigh, in 2008. She was responsible for lighting up Banbury cross in memory of Baby Loss Awareness Week last year, and she also helped with the fantastically helpful service in St Mary’s, Banbury last year, which we are repeating this Sunday, and at which I hope any hon. Member passing on the M40 will join us.

Mr Jim Cunningham (Coventry South) (Lab): I want to take the opportunity of this intervention to congratulate the hon. Member for Eddisbury (Antoinette Sandbach),
who has been tirelessly campaigning on baby loss for many years now. I have listened to these debates before and they are very difficult for everybody, even those who have no experience of baby loss. I can remember the issues around cot deaths, when women were charged and accused of perhaps harming their babies. But there is also the fairly recent problem—I think there are some ongoing investigations and prosecutions—where parents have lost their child at birth but still do not know the reason for that. I congratulate the hon. Member for Eddisbury once again for her tireless work in this area.

Victoria Prentis: I thank the hon. Gentleman for his intervention, and, if I may on behalf of my hon. Friend the Member for Eddisbury (Antoinette Sandbach), I thank him for his kind words.

The hon. Member for Nottingham South (Lilian Greenwood) mentioned the issue of inquests into stillbirths. I have been leading on that area in the all-party group because of my previous legal background and the fact that I spent much of my legal life conducting inquests on behalf of the Government. There is a current private Member’s Bill on this issue. It is a very broad Bill; the Member in charge likes to refer to it as the hatched, matched and dispatched Bill, which gives some idea of its scope. This is an extremely difficult and sensitive area both legally and in terms of the messaging. Many interest groups are concerned that it touches on the law about abortions and the law about when babies become beings and part of society, but there is no need for much of that discussion in this debate; it does not in fact need to touch on those terribly difficult issues. We in the all-party group are working hard with the Department and the Ministry of Justice, which is also very involved in this, to push this issue forward and to try to ensure that that does not happen and that we are able to address any concerns in the very small number of cases where an inquest would be helpful and extra transparency is needed. I know from my own experience that inquests are very hard for families. The Scots are also working in this area, and, give us time, as next year we may have some announcements, I hope.

Returning to Sands, I want to mention the brilliant work of my constituent Karen. She is one of the 40 volunteers to be nominated as part of the charity’s anniversary celebrations, and I am looking forward to welcoming her to Westminster later this week at our parliamentary reception. I am also very much looking forward to the service we are having in St Mary Undercroft on Thursday and I encourage anybody who works in this House, whether as a Member or peer or any of our staff, to come to that service. It is extremely warm and friendly; everybody might weep throughout, but in a positive way.

I must also praise the BBC—wow, two Conservative MPs praising the BBC in successive speeches—for highlighting our awareness week. The slot on “The Chris Evans Breakfast Show” this morning meant I had to stop the car; it was about the amazing bereavement midwife Nicola Taylor and a couple she helped around the birth of their three babies, and it was incredibly powerful. Fiona Crack’s story is currently on the BBC website. If any Member’s concentration wavers in this debate, I ask them to look at it, or perhaps better to do so when they get home tonight. “Woman’s Hour” is also handling this issue extremely sensitively and well.

I want to touch on three points this evening. First, the bereavement care pathway is, as my hon. Friend the Member for Eddisbury said, a real success. I received some brilliant care but also some less good care when our baby died 18 years ago. Crucially, the national bereavement care pathway embeds the standards across trusts—across the nation—as a matter of course; that is very important. The situation at present is still patchy. According to Sands, only 46% of trusts with maternity units provide mandatory bereavement care training for maternity unit staff. Of those, 86% provide their staff with just one hour or less of training on bereavement care each year.

While it is of course right that we focus on families, we should also think a little about midwives and obstetricians, who are also very affected by the death of a baby in their care. They often build up an enduring relationship with families, and their future health and ability to function must be considered in thinking about what training they receive.

I want to focus on neonatal units, too. They are very stressful places. Anybody with a child on a neonatal unit is not a happy parent; it is not the place they want to be. Some 41% of neonatal unit patients have no access to a trained mental health worker, and many neonatal units still do not have dedicated bereavement facilities. The Government have funded better bereavement places in nearly 40 hospitals, but this is only the beginning. Prioritising the pathway within the new NHS long-term plan would make a real difference. Planning one year ahead is not good enough. We know that despite our best efforts to reduce neonatal death and stillbirth bereavements will continue to occur, and we need to plan for that. I hope the Minister will have some good news for us on this today. My hon. Friend described the Government as passing the exam with flying colours. I agree and am very grateful for what they have done, but I would say that if the Government want to be an A* pupil, further work is needed in this area so that this becomes the norm.

My second point is that better training is only possible if we have enough midwives. I hosted the launch of the Royal College of Midwives “State of Maternity Services” report recently, which found that finally more midwives are entering training. When I hosted it last year we were very concerned by the ageing of the profession. We are all getting older—we cannot help that—but I am pleased to say that we now have over 2,100 more full-time equivalent midwives in the NHS than we did in 2010, and the vast majority are in their 20s and 30s. It is also important that we focus on retaining these midwives and persuading former midwives back to work. This is progress in the right direction, but the situation remains critical. I really do wake up at night worrying about labouring mothers in my constituency in north Oxfordshire going to the Horton General Hospital to give birth only to be told that the unit has closed because the midwife who staffs it has been sent to cover gaps at the John Radcliffe. This been the case on at least three separate occasions in recent weeks. If anybody knows of anyone who is thinking of becoming a midwife, please encourage them to do so. It is a
brilliant profession and it is important that the Department continues to encourage the training and retention of the midwives we need.

Finally, I want to touch on perinatal mental health. On the eve of world mental health day, it seems appropriate to focus on the mental health of mothers and fathers. Pregnancy presents the health service with a brilliant opportunity to engage with people who are becoming parents and to give them life lessons that will improve health choices for them and their children. Their mental health is as important as their physical health. We know that those who have had difficult pregnancies or have lost children will, understandably, struggle with subsequent births. We need to identify families at risk and pour resource in before it is needed. These families may not fit into the usual definitions of post-natal care.

The definition and structure of care in the six-week post-natal period has changed very little in the past 150 years, but during this time there have been dramatic changes in women’s health and our attitude to birth—and indeed in the outcomes of birth. It is critical that contraception is also discussed and is easily available during this time. Waiting months to have a long-acting contraceptive fitted is not helpful to new mothers. It might seem ridiculous to bring up the subject of contraception in a debate on baby loss, but it is important given the maternal mortality statistics. Some of the women who are dying while giving birth should not have been pregnant in the first place. It is critical that we deal with contraception early, where that is appropriate, and that we give people real choices so that they can get the contraception that works for them straight after they have given birth.

We in the all-party parliamentary group will continue to say the unsayable on issues such as baby ashes or the appropriateness or otherwise of inquests. These are dark areas for any society to deal with, but I believe that the APPG has been a force for good. I am really proud of the work they have given birth.

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Fifteen babies die every day in the United Kingdom either before, during or shortly after birth; the number of unexplained deaths in children aged over one is not easy to identify across the whole of the United Kingdom—and I am particularly interested in the discrepancies in bereavement care. I am firmly of the view that there is a need for bereavement suites in all neonatal units, with increased training and improved staffing levels. This is because 41% of neonatal units have no access to a trained mental health worker and many still have no dedicated bereavement facilities. I hope that we will see the kind of policy decisions in all four nations of the United Kingdom that will allow progress to be made. I welcome the commitment in Labour’s 2017 manifesto that pledged to “significantly reduce infant deaths”. We support the Government’s commitment to reducing the rate of stillbirths, neonatal deaths, maternal deaths and brain injuries that occur during or soon after birth by 50% by the year 2030.

I want to say a few words in honour of my colleague, Gordon Encinas. Gordon was a councillor in Coatbridge South and a colleague of mine in Coatbridge, Chryston and Bellshill. Gordon died earlier this year and I know that I speak for many in the Scottish Labour family—and, more importantly, North Lanarkshire Council—when I pay tribute to Gordon and thank him for all his work. I mention Gordon because he and his wife lost children to infant deaths themselves, and they committed themselves to championing this issue through supporting Bumblebee Babies, a charity based in North Lanarkshire. Gordon helped it to find a property and premises and gave it his support. It is led by Brenda Murray and now supports parents in all parts of our United Kingdom. I pay tribute to Brenda and all the staff at Bumblebee Babies, and to my late friend Gordon Encinas.

I want to pay tribute to all hon. Members involved in this, particularly my hon. Friend the Member for Lewisham, Deptford (Vicky Foxcroft) and the hon. Members for Eddisbury (Antoinette Sandbach) and for Colchester (Will Quince). Importantly, I also pay tribute to all those parents who have lost children, and I pledge to use my office to do all I can to ensure that the right support is there at the right time. Finally, I pay tribute to my mother, Helen Gaffney, who recently passed away at 86. Her first job as a young nurse was to look after stillborn children, and she looked after those angels as if they were her own. Rest in peace, Mum.

7.10 pm

Hugh Gaffney (Coatbridge, Chryston and Bellshill) (Lab): It is a real pleasure to be here for this important debate in the Chamber today. I would like to pay tribute to colleagues across the House for sponsoring the debate and for the work they do to keep this important issue on the agenda. I do not want to speak for too long, but I do have a few words to say. Baby Loss Awareness Week is an important part of the calendar and provides important support networks for bereaved parents, their families and friends. I recall sitting in the House for the debate on this issue last year, and I know that all colleagues agreed that it represented Parliament and politics at their best. In its 16th year, I welcome Baby Loss Awareness Week 2018 and the 60 charities that support it. Those charities are based in all parts of our United Kingdom, and they are doing brilliant work.

Before talking about a link to my own constituency, I want to place on the record my own personal experience of facing the loss of a child. My son was eight months old when he fell ill with meningitis and we were given 24 hours to decide whether he would survive. Twenty-eight years on, he has survived, thanks to the NHS staff at Monklands Hospital. Today I thank them once again on behalf of my family.

7.14 pm

Will Quince (Colchester) (Con): It is a pleasure to follow the hon. Member for Coatbridge, Chryston and Bellshill (Hugh Gaffney); I am pleased to say that his is one of the Scottish constituencies that I do not have a problem pronouncing. I should also like to thank all the previous speakers, particularly the hon. Member for Ceredigion (Ben Lake). He and the hon. Member for Coatbridge, Chryston and Bellshill have shown the importance of hearing men’s voices in the Baby Loss Awareness Week debate. I particularly want to thank the Backbench Business Committee for allowing the time for this debate, and my hon. Friend the Member for Eddisbury (Antoinette Sandbach), the co-chair of the all-party parliamentary group, for securing this important debate for the third year running.

In November 2015, when I was a relatively newly elected MP, I remember coming back after the recess and putting in for an end-of-day Adjournment debate.
Based on my own experience, I thought we should have a debate on bereavement care in maternity units. Little did I think that we would have made such progress in just over three years. We now have the all-party parliamentary group, and we are in our third year of marking Baby Loss Awareness Week here in Parliament. That demonstrates the power of this place when we put aside the squabbling and party political differences and work together with a clear aim. It is clear that we are united and speak with one voice when we say that we are committed to reducing stillbirths and neonatal deaths—I include miscarriage in that description. We are also committed to ensuring that we have world-class bereavement care right across our world-class NHS for those who go through the huge personal tragedy of losing a child.

This is a particularly important and poignant week for me and my family, because it is four years ago this week that we lost our son, Robert. We will be marking his birthday on Friday, when he would have been four years old. On Sunday, my two daughters and I picked out the birthday cake that we will be sharing. Sadly, we are just one of the families who are going through this experience week in and week out, up and down our country.

We should not underestimate the importance of talking about baby loss. This is why debates such as these are so important and powerful. Totally wrongly, baby loss is a massively taboo subject. We have made huge efforts over the past three and a half years to try to break the silence and the taboo by working with charities, organisations and health professionals, but the taboo still exists. It exists because we do not like talking about death, full stop, and particularly about the death of children or babies. It is important that we talk about it, however, because that little baby was a huge part of somebody’s life. It is part of their story and their journey, and to ignore it can cause irreparable issues.

We must use the power of Parliament to break that taboo and talk about the issue, rather than crossing the street and avoiding someone who has suffered a stillbirth, miscarriage or neonatal death. We should talk to them about it. We should ask about their child and refer to them by their name, because people do want to talk. If they do not want to talk, they will tell us. It is really important that they should not be ignored.

Richard Graham (Gloucester) (Con): I am so impressed by the work of the all-party parliamentary group. I rang my sister, who lost a baby a long time ago, to ask her what she would say if she were here. She asked me to encourage hon. Members to ensure that two things are included: miscarriage and neonatal deaths—I include miscarriage in that description. We are also committed to ensuring that we have world-class bereavement care right across our world-class NHS for those who go through the huge personal tragedy of losing a child.

I should also like to mention a male constituent of mine who said that there had been a lot of support for his wife when they lost a child, but there had been no male support group. What does my hon. Friend think of those suggestions?

Will Quince: I thank my hon. Friend for raising those very good points, which are entirely valid. His points about support, both in hospital and post-hospital, and about the support available to fathers, are very important and I shall come on to them in a moment.

Just before we move on to the debate proper, I want to talk a bit about my right hon. Friend the Member for South West Surrey (Mr Hunt), because we have not had a chance since his elevation to the position of Foreign Secretary to praise him for the work he did on these matters when he was Health Secretary. From the beginning, we also felt supported by Ben Gummer—I think I am allowed to call him that now, as he is the former Member for Ipswich; he encouraged us to set up the all-party parliamentary group. However, the former Health and Social Care Secretary, now Foreign Secretary, could not have been more supportive, and we felt from the very beginning that we were pushing against an open door. He knew that the issue needed to be addressed, and he threw the full weight of the Department behind it. I thank him on the behalf of the APPG, and I know that all the charities feel the same way. He was hugely supportive and continues to be so.

We produced a video for Baby Loss Awareness Week, which is live now, and my right hon. Friend features in it, showing how passionate he is about tackling this issue. I also want to say how much the rest of the APPG and I are looking forward to working with the new Secretary of State for Health and Social Care, my right hon. Friend the Member for West Suffolk (Matt Hancock), who has already reached out to me and other members of the APPG, as have his special advisers, to continue that work, which they recognise is important.

Several colleagues have already referenced the hugely important work done by charities up and down the country. That includes both big charities such as Sands, which is marking its 40th anniversary this year, the Lullaby Trust, the Mariposa Trust, Tamba and so many others and small charities that provide support locally. The support that they provide to parents at the most difficult time in their lives is so valuable, and I thank everyone who works in and volunteers for those charities.

Lilian Greenwood: The hon. Gentleman is making a powerful contribution, as he always does, and I congratulate him and all the members of the APPG on their work. Will he join me in congratulating a local Nottinghamshire charity called Forever Stars? Not only is it doing fantastic work supporting parents who have lost a child, but it has managed to raise £300,000 to create two new bereavement suites at the two Nottingham hospitals over the past year. I know that that has already been touched on in the debate, but it makes such a difference to parents who have experienced the loss of a child when they have somewhere suitable to be with their baby and deal with the aftermath of a terrible situation.

Will Quince: I thank the hon. Lady for her intervention. I will absolutely thank and pay tribute to that charity. In so many cases, bereaved parents want to do something to make a difference and to provide a legacy for or mark the life of their child, however short, and raising money to support our NHS or to provide support for bereaved parents is hugely worth while. If I heard the hon. Lady, Lady right, an incredible £300,000 was raised: I pay tribute to the work that parents across the country do to raise
such sums, which support the NHS in providing world-class facilities. I will discuss this further in a bit, but although we do have world-class facilities and bereavement suites in some of our hospitals, they do not have them, which is an issue in and of itself.

I have thanked charities, but it is also important to thank the clinicians and support staff within the NHS who work so hard in this area. They really are heroes, and their work is incredible. Midwives do an incredible job, because although they are so often there at the best time in someone’s life—when a child is born—they are sometimes sadly also there at the very worst time in someone's life. Their ability to, in effect, wear both hats and provide that caring, compassionate, empathetic support is a credit to them. We really do have world-class staff in our NHS.

I also thank all the clinicians who are working so hard on the national bereavement care pathway. Numerous colleagues have mentioned it already, and it is important to reference the progress made so far. I do not want this to be a back-patting debate, because I will move on to some areas where the Government could do more, but we have achieved quite a lot in just over three years. The first, and probably most significant, achievement was the Government’s commitment to reduce stillbirth and neonatal death by 20% by 2020 and by half by 2025. I note that that target has been moved forward—I think the target three years ago was 2030—thanks to the work of the Secretary of State for Health and Social Care, Health Ministers and clinicians. Having spoken to the Department and to clinicians up and down the country, I understand that those targets are realistic and achievable and that we are on track to achieve them, which is quite incredible.

However, it is important to note that even if we achieve the target of reducing stillbirth and neonatal death by 50%, that still means that around 2,000 or 2,500 babies are dying in the UK every single year and that a similar number of families will be going through a horrific personal tragedy, so we must ensure that we have world-class support. That is why the national care bereavement pathway, which I think is fair to say was a concept initially drawn up based on the APPG’s work with charities, is game changing. The pathway is game changing, because what we had and continue to have across our NHS is world-class bereavement care, but it can be found only in pockets. It is not consistent across the NHS.

A particular hospital trust may have one or perhaps even two specialist bereavement suites and one, two or maybe more specialist bereavement-trained midwives or gynaecological counsellors, and all sorts of charities may be supporting bereaved parents within that hospital trust. In other hospitals, however, there may be no bereavement suite and perhaps just one or even no specialist bereavement-trained midwives or gynaecological counsellors. That is an issue, so a national bereavement care pathway that provides consistent, compassionate, empathetic care and support across our NHS, whichever hospital one visits, is so important.

Antoinette Sandbach: I congratulate my hon. Friend on that point. However, even where world-class care is not available, that can change, and the Medway NHS Foundation Trust is a great example of that. It received a negative inspection report, but it completely turned the situation around and now has absolutely first-class facilities. World-class care is achievable when hospital managers and NHS trusts are absolutely committed to delivering it.

Will Quince: My hon. Friend is absolutely right. The core purpose of the national bereavement care pathway is to show what good care looks like so that it can be rolled out across our NHS. My hon. Friend is right that we can do that by having bereavement suites and trained gynaecological counsellors and midwives, and we are seeing it. The pathway has now been launched in 32 sites, and I must again praise the Government for their initial funding, which supported the establishment of the principle and the pilots, and then the further funding for the roll-out into more sites.

I echo the comments made by my hon. Friend the Member for Eddisbury and for Banbury (Victoria Prentis) about further funding to roll out the pathway to ensure that it reaches the entire NHS nationwide, but 77% of professionals at the pilot sites who were aware of the pathway agree that bereavement care improved in the trust during the trial, and some 95% of parents interviewed agreed that the hospital was a caring and supportive environment. We therefore know that the pathway is making a difference and will work, which is why the Government have been so supportive. We just want to ensure that it is rolled out. The roll-out has deliberately happened in stages because ensuring that it is effective and embedded is just as important as the initial implementation.

Others have mentioned the Parental Bereavement (Leave and Pay) Act 2018, which is an incredible and ground-breaking piece of legislation. It is the first time that workers have had such a right, and it is one of the best rights in this area in the world. I pay tribute to my hon. Friend the Member for Thirsk and Malton (Kevin Hollinrake) for so ably and passionately steering the legislation through the House of Commons and then ensuring its passage through the House of Lords and beyond. It is game changing, because it means that, from 2020, parents who lose a child up to the age of 18 will be entitled to two weeks’ paid leave. That is particularly important in relation to this baby loss debate, because it means that parents who lose a child to stillbirth will also be entitled to those two weeks.

For a mother, those extra two weeks may not be a huge change because mothers are entitled to their full maternity leave, but for a father it is game changing. Instead of two weeks’ paternity leave, he will get four weeks, because he will get the additional two weeks of paid leave. The Act will make a huge difference to fathers up and down the country who go through the awful experience of a stillbirth.

I said earlier that this was not a back-patting debate. Far, far more needs to be done. Earlier we had reference to bereavement suites. It is essential that we have bereavement suites in every hospital up and down the country. It is not acceptable that any parent should have to suffer a stillbirth or neonatal death in a maternity unit where they can hear happy families, crying babies and people with balloons and teddies—all the joy of that. People who are going through this most traumatic of experiences need somewhere quiet for reflection, to grieve and to spend time with their baby in peace. We know that we can provide this because NHS trusts up and down the country are providing bereavement suites.
In Colchester we were lucky to have use of the Rosemary suite, and I am not quite sure what we would have done without it.

So we have to ensure, Minister, that we have a bereavement suite in every hospital away from the main maternity unit. Ideally, I would like another room to be available, because you cannot book in. You do not know when exactly you are going to have a baby—these things do come on, as my wife and I found out with our second, who was born at home, unexpectedly. It was also a pretty traumatic experience, but it ended well. The point is that people do not know and they cannot book suites out. They can just turn up at hospital. If, sadly, the suite is already being used, another room should be available. It might not have the full facilities of a bereavement suite, but it is important to have that room.

As was mentioned earlier, cold cots are also important. Not all parents will want to spend time with their child, but those who want to should be able to spend as much as they need after the birth, and for that cold cots are important.

As I mentioned earlier, it is important that bereavement-trained midwives or gynaecological counsellors are available in every hospital—not part time but full time, and available for parents when they need them. Let us not forget that many stillbirths and neonatal deaths are sudden and unexpected. It is a hugely traumatic experience and people need support immediately. A trained individual is so important. However, there is merit in ensuring that bereavement training is a module in the midwifery course so that every midwife is trained to an extent, because sadly we know that they will come across stillbirth and neonatal death in their career.

The other thing is to ensure that there is learning from every miscarriage and stillbirth. We still do not really understand why 50% of stillbirths happen. I will come on to it, but research is so important. I have already mentioned embedding the national bereavement care pathway.

I want to touch on the new pregnancy loss review, because it has not been mentioned so far. One of its heads is Zoe Clark-Coates of the Mariposa Trust. We often talk about stillbirth and neonatal death, but we do not talk enough about miscarriage and we still do not really know the true numbers of miscarriages. Colleagues in the Chamber have spoken emotively in previous debates about their experience of losing a child at less than 24 weeks. They said that their loss was not recognised in any way because it was classed as a miscarriage, not a stillbirth, even though they gave birth. This is why the pregnancy loss review is so important.

I echo the comments made by my hon. Friend the Member for Banbury about post-mortems. Too often, people are scared to have the conversation about a post-mortem. It is a difficult subject; I would not want to approach parents who have just lost a child and ask if they would consider a post-mortem. But it is so important that that question is asked, because post-mortems will enable us to start to understand why stillbirths happen. So changing cultures within NHS trusts to ensure that that question is asked as a matter of course is important. The parents can say no, but if they do not offered the opportunity, they may look back and say, “My child’s life could have made a difference to future children.”

It would like to see the national bereavement care pathway and bereavement support more widely included as part of the matrix and assessment regime for the Care Quality Commission. We do not put enough emphasis on bereavement and the support that parents are given. I would also like to see support for subsequent pregnancies. There is pretty good support in many NHS trusts at the point at which someone suffers a loss, but what about subsequent pregnancies? Often the mother and the father will be thinking every single day up until the 12-week scan, every single day up until the 20-week scan, “Is this going to happen again?” But at that point often no support is available unless they reach out. The support network is patchy across the country.

My hon. Friend the Member for Gloucester (Richard Graham) spoke about fathers, and he was absolutely right to do so. As I said at the beginning of the debate, it is important that bereavement support is available unless they reach out. The support network is patchy across the country.

Lastly, I want to touch on another passion of mine. We talk about 15 babies dying every single day in the UK. Every single one is a tragedy. But 7,175 die every single day worldwide. Every day 830 mothers die from preventable causes related to pregnancy, and 99% of them are in developing countries. So let us be passionate about reducing stillbirth and neonatal death here in the UK, but let us be equally passionate about tackling this issue worldwide. I am a big champion of UK aid because I know that it makes a difference around the world. UK aid is not sold, especially by some of the right-wing media, but it is so important in tackling issues such as this. I do not think that there is one person in this country who would say that spending money on reducing the number of deaths of babies is not money well spent. If we were to get the newborn mortality rate of every country down to the average of high-income countries such as our own, or even better below it, that would save 16 million lives a year.

UK aid is already making a huge difference to this issue. In 2015-16, something like £124 million was spent on maternal and neonatal health. That is equivalent to about 15% of aid spending. The Department for
International Development is supporting programmes in about 16 countries, focusing on maternal and neonatal health. I recently made a visit with Unicef to Ethiopia, a country that has a high prevalence of baby loss. Although the number of deaths of children aged between one month and five years has dramatically fallen in recent decades, newborn death remains a massive issue. Think of the difference we can make worldwide if we can share some of the learnings from this country and others in the western world by using UK aid and support from clinicians in this country. Let me give an example of that.

One of the biggest causes of newborn death in Ethiopia is sepsis, which is relatively rare in the UK because we have high levels of hygiene and sanitation. UK aid water projects will make a huge difference on that, but we can do far more. At one neonatal unit there, the scrubs and clogs I was asked to put on were dirtier than the clothes I was wearing, which was a little worrying. There was a baby in there with sepsis, and I spoke to the doctor, who was a general practitioner, not a specialist in gynaecology or an obstetrician. There is a real need for some specialism and specialist training there. I asked, “Where is the hand wash? Where is your alcohol rub? This is not going about 10 feet long in a hospital corridor in the UK without finding an alcohol rub dispenser.” He replied, “Ah, yes, I’ve got some of this” and he reached into a bottom drawer, underneath a load of stuff, and pulled it out. This is exactly the sort of intervention, on cleanliness, hygiene and sanitation, that we in the UK can share with countries around the world and that can make a difference. So I invite the world by using UK aid and support from clinicians in this country. Let me give an example of that.

The point has been made about parents, and I am a parent, all three of whose children were born relatively easily and successfully. As one or two Members of this place know, I am also a grandparent and a brother-in-law, and for that reason am not untouched by the type of tragedy that has been described today. One thinks, “It is not going to affect me”, but it comes damned close. So I have the experience. The second thing I found to be almost like a searing wound to me personally: witnessing the extraordinary grief of what happened. This was a searing, dreadful, ghastly grief. The hon. Member for Colchester (Will Quince) has said that we must reach out, give people a hug and ask how we can help, but that grief has to be seen to be believed and it is terrible.

Victoria Prentis: I have really appreciated the hon. Gentleman’s input into our group. We should, of course, have mentioned the importance of grandparents and wider family. They have been present in the all-party group, in the form of my father, right from its inception in the middle of the night, when we were waiting for a late vote, and they play a crucial role in helping parents and others to get through the awful loss of a baby. Of course grandparents matter!

Jamie Stone: The hon. Lady makes the point much better than I can. I take great comfort in the thought that I may be slightly more than just a doddering old fellow who amuses the kids. I like to think, and I hope, that I helped my two daughters through their trauma.

The hon. Member for Colchester made the point about the partner—about the man in the equation—several times, and nothing was ever truer. How terrible it must be to witness a stillbirth—a child who arrives too early to survive. I would dare to suggest that the man is emotionally every bit as bruised as the woman.

I wish to conclude simply by saying that in a debate such as this the House is at its best, and I give credit to the hon. Member for Eddisbury and others for that. I hope and believe that if people out there chance upon this debate online or read the record of it, they will find some human comfort—some milk of human kindness—which shows that we care. The hon. Member for Banbury (Victoria Prentis) mentioned to me the service in the Crypt on Thursday, and I will take part in the service and contribute a reading with the greatest of pleasure. Finally, I cannot even begin to surmise how, but when we had my family traumas, to my great surprise several Members, from all parts of the House, came up to me and said, “We understand. We know what you are going through.” When a completely unexpected hand reaches out like that, it is pure gold and reminds one of what friendship is really all about.
circumstances, answers as to why this situation has occurred can help to provide respite. The second reaction, one that is testament to the incredible empathy human beings have, even in the most difficult circumstances, is the desire to ensure that lessons are learned from their personal tragedy so that no one else has to endure that same heartbreak. I am in awe of colleagues, such as those here this evening, who have been through such a traumatic experience and found the strength not just to share that experience, but to use it to campaign successfully for improvements in care and to highlight areas to improve so that others do not experience such suffering in the future. I commend the work of the all-party group and my hon. Friend the Member for Colchester (Will Quince), for Eddisbury (Antoinette Sandbach) and for Banbury (Victoria Prentis) for their work to develop the bereavement care pathway. I have worked in hospitals where there has been excellent bereavement care, with the bereavement suite that has been described, and in others where the care has been less well developed, and I have seen the importance of the national bereavement care pathway. I congratulate them on it.

Although he is no longer in his seat, I also congratulate my hon. Friend the Member for Thirsk and Malton (Kevin Hollinrake) on his private Member’s Bill, which has developed child bereavement leave. As my hon. Friend the Member for Colchester has said, it will enable mothers to have an extra two weeks of maternity leave and fathers to have a doubling of their leave—some extra time to reflect and be at home with their family.

One recent improvement that the Government have made is the introduction of independent investigations by the Healthcare Safety Investigation Branch, which will look at every case of stillbirth or life-changing injury. That will help to meet the needs of parents in respect of that first question—“Why did this happen?”—and to prevent it from happening again. When the lessons are disseminated throughout the health service, doctors and midwives will be able to learn from previous experience to ensure that problems do not occur in future. It will be important—I look to the Minister to respond on this—to ensure that health professionals can speak openly in investigations without fear of blame. A blame culture will deter people from speaking openly and prevent improvements to patient safety. I have spoken numerous times in the Chamber about patient safety, and I am hopeful that the national roll-out of investigations will help us to meet the NHS’s goal of becoming the safest healthcare system in the world in which to give birth.

One development in neonatal care that I have seen in my 17 years of practice is the increasing centralisation of neonatal care, with the smallest and sickest infants now transported to specialist centres. I have worked in these centres and, although they provide exceptional care, they are often many miles away from the hospital where the child was first admitted or where the family live. For example, if a baby’s family live in Sleaford and North Hykeham, their nearest tertiary centre is in Nottingham. If the centre in Nottingham is full, the family may be sent many hours away to Norwich, Sheffield or Leicester. For working families on low incomes, the need to visit their sick baby several hours away imposes significant travel costs. Some families go through intense financial difficulty to meet that need to travel, while others have the distress of being physically unable to travel to see their baby as often as they would wish because they do not have the money to get to the tertiary centres. I raised the very same issue in the debate last year and would be interested to hear an update from the Minister on any measures being taken to help struggling families, many of whom work, to meet the travel costs in such an extremely distressing situation.

**Dr Johnson:** I congratulate the hospital in Worthing for its outstanding success. My hon. Friend is right that there is a balance to be struck between the centralisation of care for babies who require very low-volume but high-specialist care, and the need for care to be delivered as close as is reasonably practical to the individual family concerned. That is true of all medical specialties, really. In the case of neonates, we probably have the balance roughly right, but a trend may be starting whereby people ask for things to be centralised that in my perception do not really need to be centralised. As a profession, I often see babies who are not returned to the step-down care as quickly as they could be. Babies are sometimes kept in the tertiary centres for longer than is absolutely necessary. There are complex reasons for that, but I would be grateful if the Minister looked into the issue so that babies can be returned closer to home as soon as possible.

I welcome the Government’s ambitious aims to halve the rate of stillbirths and neonatal deaths by 2025. That will be possible only by reducing the number of pre-term deliveries, which are the leading cause of neonatal death in the UK. The Department of Health and Social Care’s goal of reducing pre-term birth from 8% to 6% will require a lot more research and intervention. We have a healthier population of women, but the number of pre-term babies continues to increase. More funding is needed for pregnancy research, and particularly for research into the causes of pre-eclampsia, cervical length and infections such as group B strep, as well as for the identification of small babies with early scanning. There must also be more work to discourage smoking, which we already know is an established risk factor for pre-term delivery. I welcome the previous Secretary of State’s saying in November 2017 that the Government will reduce smoking during pregnancy from 10.6% to 6% and raise awareness of foetal movement. All those things will contribute towards the reduction of the
number of neonatal deaths and stillbirths. Through that work, the Government are best placed to meet their “halve it” aim, and in doing so save 4,000 lives.

Finally, I wish to discuss those babies who die in the post-neonatal period—that is, under the age of one but after 28 days of life. Currently, 1.1 in every 1,000 babies die in the post-neonatal period. The major reason is babies having congenital malformations, and the second most common reason is sudden infant death, the rate of which has recently increased, although the cause is not clear. What is the Minister doing to identify the reasons for the recent increase in sudden infant deaths? What is being done to prevent the number of sudden infant deaths from rising further and, indeed, to bring it down?

7.56 pm

Jim Shannon (Strangford) (DUP): I thank Mr Speaker for granting this debate and the Backbench Business Committee for selecting the subject. I thank the hon. Member for Eddisbury (Antoinette Sandbach), who as always set the scene on a subject about which she is very passionate and knowledgeable, with her personal story. I thank all the right hon. and hon. Members who have made incredible contributions, every one of them straight from the heart. They have certainly set the scene for a very serious debate in which we acknowledge what has happened. The hon. Member for Colchester (Will Quince) put forward ideas that he thought would be helpful. Everyone did that, to be fair, but he did so especially.

I will never begin to speak in a debate of this variety without first expressing my sincere sympathies to all those who have been affected by the loss of their baby, at whatever stage. My thoughts are with those people today, and I pray that the God of peace and comfort will be their strength. Baby loss is an extremely painful topic, but it is one that is being spoken of more and more. Such debates enable some of the pain and hurt to be talked about, and that can only be a good thing. We must thank charities such as Saying Goodbye for raising the topic and saying that it is okay to speak out, to remember and reflect. Whatever way a person deals with their pain is okay, as long as they know that they are not alone. Such debates allow us to express the message, “You are not alone.” The Members present who speak in these debates reflect the opinions of our constituents outside the Chamber, about whom we talk.

As I have said in previous debates, my mother suffered several miscarriages, as did my sister and a member of my staff—in fact, the member of staff who helps me to prepare my speaking notes. For me and for all of us in the Chamber, this is a matter that is very close to our hearts. The hon. Member for Caithness, Sutherland and Easter Ross (Jamie Stone) spoke of the miscarriages that his mum had between his birth and that of his younger brother. That is probably very real to me, as well. As we spoke about my staff member’s workload for the coming week, we realised that it was Baby Loss Awareness Week. Might I suggest that if a debate ever came at the right time, this one did? We discussed how during the last two weeks of September, we had heard of six couples who live in my constituency who had suffered miscarriages. That is six children lost; six expectations never to be fulfilled; six homes filled with sadness; six women who felt empty; six partners who felt so helpless; and countless loved ones who simply had no words. Those six people were known to all of us very personally, and the fact that one in four pregnancies ends in miscarriage has never felt so real.

In the past eight months, I have known three ladies, who are also constituents of mine, who have carried their babies for the full nine months only to have them for just two hours. I can well remember my wife, Sandra, informing me that she was pregnant with our first son, Jamie. Like every parent, I had never felt such joy. I planned for our future and imagined what he would look like. I did not check whether the baby was a boy or a girl as I have always liked the element of chance. I just hoped that whatever sex the child was, they would be accepted. To be truthful, I did ask for three boys and I got three boys—I am not sure how that worked. As I held my child, I realised that the expectation could never meet the reality of having a child in my arms. I also remember very well holding my first grandchild, Katie—I know that there are other Members here who are grandparents as well. Katie is now nine years old. I remember when Del Boy, the character on TV, took Dunmian in his arms and he looked at him in wonder, and there was I at the Ulster Hospital in Dundonald. I said, “Next year, Katie, we will be millionaires.” Of course, we were not millionaires, but we were in a way as we had our grandchild. Such was the joy that we felt. Therefore, when I think of those families who have lost that hope for their future, my heart simply aches. Through my constituents, I have stared into the face of pure sadness and emptiness, and I would have given anything to change the outcome. That was never going to be in my power, or in the power of anybody in this Chamber, but, having spoken to many women, one theme is clear: they cannot forget their loss and they do not want others to forget it either.

I know that my parliamentary aide will not mind me saying that she lost her first baby abroad while on a church mission trip. She returned a few years later with her family—she now has two wee girls—and planted a tree with a simple plaque in remembrance of the wee child who had died. This simple act of remembrance, while not addressing her grief, helped her to move forward, as she knew that that tree would grow and be a testament to the life that began but could not flourish and grow. This is a desire that is reflected in the events that are organised to celebrate the short lives of babies. Women no longer feel that they must and should grieve in silence. The taboo that existed in my mother’s generation that kept women silent in their grief has gone now. One look on social media will reveal messages that say no more than a date, or a number of dates, and that is proof that it is good for some women to acknowledge and commemorate their loss. Balloon releases and services of remembrance indicate that those who grieve want to see their loss acknowledged.

There are, of course, other women who wish to grieve in silence and that is their right, and I absolutely respect that. Some pain can never find a voice. We may never know the people around us who have gone through baby loss—I am sure that a trowl of families of staff members in this place would show us all to be connected in some way to a lost child—but what we must know is that there is a way in which we can remember and pay tribute to those lives, those hopes and those dreams that have been lost.
I want to take a brief moment to think about the fathers. This is something that my aide mentioned to me and that others have referred to as well. Fathers suffer emotional loss—not the physical emotional loss—and have to watch their loved one going through the physical and emotional trauma of loss and they need to be remembered as well. It is their loss as well and they have a right to grieve, and that should be said in this place, too. Others have also referred to grandparents and other family connections. There must be support available for the whole family, and I feel that this is lacking. I have heard it said that the leaflet that is handed to a mother when she miscarries does not help. It is often not read or thought about. A follow-up phone call offering help and advice may go a long way to dealing with the pain and the fear, and I am grateful to the charities that fill that breach when perhaps, with great respect, the NHS does not.

What words do I have for those who have lost babies?

Will Quince: I distinctly remember the intervention that the hon. Gentleman made in that speech back in November 2015 when he raised the importance of the hospital chaplain and the huge comfort that they give to families. Does he agree that the point he made then is as valid today as it was three years ago?

Jim Shannon: Absolutely, and I thank the hon. Gentleman for his intervention and for reminding us of that debate. Like many others in this Chamber, I am a man of faith who feels that it is important to have a chaplain available—to have someone to share one’s grief and hard times. The intervention that he mentions was right along those lines. I felt that it was so important to have that help at that time, just when one needed it the most. I thank him for his intervention and for his salient reminder.

Richard Graham: Chaplains play an incredibly important role, as do the volunteers who work with them. I think that we have more than 30 in Gloucester Royal Hospital, all of whom go through a significant amount of training for about a year. They are multi-faith, so we have Muslims and Sikhs as well as Christians. We also have chaplains of no particular faith, and they are very clear about not trying to differentiate so that a Baptist chaplain might only talk to a Baptist patient and all that sort of thing. Increasingly, there are secular patients who need someone who can engage with them without religion. Does the hon. Gentleman agree that it would be useful for the Minister to say a few words about the role of chaplains in hospitals and whether the encouragement that they and the volunteers who work with them get at our hospital should become best practice around the country?

Jim Shannon: I thank the hon. Gentleman for his intervention. He is right: the chaplain has a responsibility for all those of faith and of no faith, because that is the time when a person needs that wee bit of succour, support and compassion—perhaps even a shoulder to cry on. Those are important things, and he is right to mention them.

I have asked a few women for the things that have been said by them or to them, and this is the message that I want to leave with the House today. “What has happened to you is not okay, but you will be okay. Give yourself time. It doesn’t matter how much time you need. One day you will realise that the smile that you have faked for so long is now a real smile. It doesn’t mean you have forgotten your baby—it means that you can remember them while you live. Weeping endures for a night, but joy comes in the morning.”

8.7 pm

Patricia Gibson (North Ayrshire and Arran) (SNP): I want to begin by echoing the words of the hon. Member for Banbury (Victoria Prentis), who is no longer in her place, that this is indeed one of the most difficult debates—if not the most difficult, debate—in the entire parliamentary calendar. It must be debated because it is too important for us not to. A number of my colleagues would have dearly liked to participate in this debate today, but, sadly, our conference is not accommodated in the recesses of Parliament, so therefore they were unable to be here.

As the hon. Member for Colchester (Will Quince) has pointed out, this is the third year that we have made a special effort in this House to mark Baby Loss Awareness Week, which culminates in International Pregnancy and Infant Loss Remembrance Day 2018 on 15 October. In a cruel twist of fate, sadly, that is the same date that my own baby was stillborn at full term in 2009. Kenneth would have celebrated his ninth birthday on that day. It is in his honour that I began to talk and to campaign—and I will continue to talk and continue to campaign—about this issue. I want to shine a light on it to break the taboo around it and to break the silence that we all know exists and that we are all working to change.

I want to thank my fellow members of the all-party group—the hon. Members for Colchester, for Eddisbury (Antoinette Sandbach) and for Banbury. As a Scottish member of that group, I like to think that I am able to provide a Scottish perspective. Health in Scotland is devolved, but on this issue, as in all issues, I believe that where we can work together and learn from each other then we most certainly should do so, because this issue is certainly above politics. I also want to thank all those across the House who have championed the issue of baby loss and shared their personal and painful experiences and circumstances, as well as the charities that work on the frontline every single day, helping bereaved parents through this life-changing and traumatic event, as the hon. Member for Eddisbury reminded us and others in this debate have pointed out.

It is important for all the parents, grandparents, aunts, uncles, brothers and sisters who have been affected by such an appalling tragedy as baby loss to know that even though they feel isolated in their grief, they are not alone. Sadly, the tragedy of baby loss and stillbirth is terrifyingly common, with around 6,500 babies dying alone. Sadly, the tragedy of baby loss and stillbirth is terrifyingly common, with around 6,500 babies dying alone. Sadly, the tragedy of baby loss and stillbirth is terrifyingly common, with around 6,500 babies dying alone. Sadly, the tragedy of baby loss and stillbirth is terrifyingly common, with around 6,500 babies dying alone. Sadly, the tragedy of baby loss and stillbirth is terrifyingly common, with around 6,500 babies dying alone. Sadly, the tragedy of baby loss and stillbirth is terrifyingly common, with around 6,500 babies dying alone.
However, I am pleased to say that progress is being made. The hon. Member for Colchester made a good point about back-slapping, but I do think that we have to acknowledge it when we make progress.

Although we are not yet there, Scotland is now close to the high standard set by Nordic nations in minimising stillbirths and early infant deaths. I was very pleased to read that, according to a University of Leicester study, rates have fallen across the entire UK, with Scotland leading the way, although of course there can be no room for complacency. The rate of stillbirths and deaths of babies within 28 days in Scotland was 4.72 per 1,000 live births in 2017, which compares with the Nordic rate of 4.3. Probably everybody here who has an interest in these matters—I think that we all do—will know that Norway, Sweden, Denmark, Finland and Iceland are generally regarded as having the gold standard in neonatal survival. The 2015 rate of stillbirths and deaths of babies within 28 days of birth for the entire UK was 5.61 per 1,000 live births—a drop from 6.04 in 2013. So, yes, improvement has been made, but this is not job done; far from it. Nevertheless, it is extremely welcome progress. Prevention is, and absolutely must remain, the key.

Mary Ross-Davie, director of the Royal College of Midwives in Scotland, has said that in recent years Scotland has undertaken very important work in this area that has improved outcomes for Scotland, with the national stillbirth group established in 2013. In addition, we have had the Maternity and Children Quality Improvement Collaborative since that time. Moreover—as we have heard about today with regard to England—the Scottish Government have funded the national bereavement care pathway, which will benefit bereaved parents across Scotland. I think that this is being rolled out in parallel with the care pathway in England.

The pathway is important because it seeks to improve the quality of bereavement care experienced by parents and families at all stages of pregnancy and baby loss, so that all bereaved parents across the UK can expect the same high-quality, sensitive bereavement care that they need and deserve. It is still in the process of being established, and it will involve collaboration and partnership with baby loss charities and stakeholders, and so it should. The stillbirth and neonatal death charity, Sands, is working with—and will continue to work with—the Scottish Government, other baby loss charities and other healthcare partners in Scotland to develop the approach over the next two years, with the plan to pilot, implement and embed the pathway across Scotland by March 2020.

When the worst happens and parents must face this nightmare, it is important that the correct support mechanisms are in place. That is the least that can be done, but sadly this was not always the case in the past, when bereavement care experienced by parents and families during pregnancy or shortly after birth could be patchy and variable, as the hon. Member for Banbury pointed out and to which I can personally testify. Support and the right kind of care in the immediate aftermath of such a life-changing event can make all the difference to those affected, as we heard from the hon. Member for Eddisbury.

I have lobbied the Scottish Government, who are now also investigating the provision of fatal accident inquiries for stillbirths in some circumstances, as was mentioned earlier. This is another mark of how far we have come and it is a huge step. Nobody should underestimate the complexity of this step forward—of the fact that the issue is even under discussion and investigation. It is also being explored by the Department of Health in England.

Currently, until a baby lives independently of its mother, any change in the law here would be profound and require the law around it to be looked at very carefully. Of course, no one would expect a fatal accident inquiry—in England, a coroner’s inquiry—to be carried out routinely following a stillbirth, although it may be appropriate in very specific circumstances, not as a way of seeking to punish anyone who may have made mistakes, but as a learning tool to better inform medical practitioners as they carry out and seek to improve antenatal care. The only reason that this idea has even been raised at all is that in the past many hospitals have been extremely reluctant to investigate stillbirths fully and transparently. Parents often report feeling excluded from the process and denied proper answers to the question, “Why did our baby die?” We know that sometimes it is not possible to answer that question; sometimes we just do not know. But when explanations or information can be given, they should be. Any relevant information needs to be shared with bereaved parents. The fact that it has not been in the past is not good enough, and it is hoped that the bereavement care pathway and a more transparent ethos around baby loss will help to address these issues.

Of course, we could not measure progress and the support that parents and families can access without mentioning the Parental Bereavement (Leave and Pay) Act 2018, which we heard about earlier in the debate. This legislation means that, for the first time ever, bereaved parents who lose a child up to the age of 18 years old are entitled to statutory paid leave under the law. Parents who go through a stillbirth are also protected.

An age-old wrong has been corrected in this legislation. The law has rightly recognised the enormity of losing a child and the protection in the workplace that parents should be entitled to expect as a right, not as a gift conferred on them by their employer. I thank everyone in the House whom I had the privilege to work alongside on this legislation, particularly the hon. Member for Thirsk and Malton (Kevin Hollinrake), whose approach was sensitive and reflective; for that, I think we all thank him. The Act is not perfect, but it is ground-breaking and I am sure that it will evolve over time.

Another measure that will help with baby loss is the move in England to permit the registration of babies lost before 24 weeks’ gestation. The Scottish Government are also actively looking at this with input from professionals in the field and baby loss charities, examining the current system, its effects and how a potential voluntary registration process or other kind of process could work in practice. Certainly, parents who lose their baby before the 24-week threshold—when it is classified as a miscarriage, rather than a stillbirth—often feel that their loss is dismissed, officially at least, because there is no documentation to testify to the fact that their baby existed, was eagerly awaited and that their loss has left a lasting impact on the entire family.

In such cases, the opportunity to register their baby’s death may provide many parents with some comfort at an extraordinarily difficult time. For that, if nothing
else, such a provision must be seriously examined. We are all mindful of cases we have heard about whereby twins are lost—one before the 24-week threshold and the other after it—but only one baby is eligible for registration. Imagine being the parents going through that. It is not hard to see how much worse that makes parents and families feel. That is something that we are looking at in both England and Scotland—it is something that we should look at, and it is time that we did so. All that can be done to ease the trauma of losing a child must be done.

The speech that I have delivered today on this issue is, thankfully, more optimistic than previous speeches that I have delivered on it. Progress has been made, and I am delighted about that. Slowly—very slowly, but we are getting there—we are beginning to break the taboo on this issue, which demands that we move forward. We have come some way, but there is still much to do, and the hon. Member for Eddisbury pointed out some sobering examples in England and Wales. According to Embrace, 15 babies are stillborn or die within the first 28 days of life, and 80% of stillbirths and deaths that are investigated could have been avoided with better care. We can and must do better, and progress in recent years shows that we are capable of doing so. For my part, as a Scottish MP, I will continue to communicate with the Scottish Government and maintain a dialogue on this matter. I will also work with the all-party parliamentary group on baby loss.

We have discussed the emotional trauma of baby loss, but we should remember that there is also a social cost. Parents who lose a child, whatever the circumstances, are eight times more likely than their counterparts to divorce. They are more likely to drop out of the workforce, perhaps never to return. We have to do everything that we can to support parents in this position. The former Cabinet Secretary for Health and Sport, Shona Robison MSP, was receptive to concerns that I raised with her. Her successor, Jeane Freeman MSP, has continued very much in the same vein. I very much look forward to next year and continuing to work to challenge the silence, taboo and difficulties surrounding baby loss and neonatal death. Cross-party work has never been so constructive, I suspect, and on an issue that we all care about and which impacts all too often on too many families in every single constituency across the United Kingdom. We have a duty to work together, we have a duty to make things better, and we have a duty to break the silence.

8.22 pm

Justin Madders (Ellesmere Port and Neston) (Lab): I am humbled once again to respond to such an important debate on behalf of the Opposition. I would like to begin by congratulating the hon. Member for Eddisbury (Antoinette Sandbach) on securing today’s debate and on her continuing work in drawing from her personal experience to campaign on behalf of thousands of others who have been affected by this important subject. I also pay tribute to my hon. Friend the Member for Washington and Sunderland West (Mrs Hodgson), who could not be with us tonight. As we have heard, her contributions to the all-party parliamentary group is greatly valued, as is the work of all the members of that group who have spoken tonight. There are something in

the order of 630 registered APPGs, but few if any can claim to have so much success in bringing attention to a vital subject and securing a tangible change in policy.

As several Members have said, today’s debate has once again shown Parliament at its best, and I would like to reflect on some of the contributions that we have heard. The hon. Member for Eddisbury spoke in positive terms about the success of the national pathway and gave interesting statistics on parents’ feedback. Some 98% felt that they had been treated with respect, which is really important and, critically, 90% felt that they had been provided with information that was easy to understand. She gave the example of a parent who had to go and speak to the doctor on about five occasions to get an explanation that they were comfortable with, which brought home how important it is in this difficult area for parents to be empowered to ask questions and understand what has happened. It was also interesting to hear that medical professionals gave positive feedback as well.

The hon. Member for Eddisbury expressed concern about ongoing investigations in the Shrewsbury area at the Countess of Chester Hospital, and I am sure that when they conclude we will both have questions to ask. It is worth saying that one of the things of which I have been aware, particularly in relation to the Countess of Chester issue, is the impact on the local community. Many parents, whether they are directly affected or not, have children who were born at the hospital, and were understandably concerned when the news came out. We need to take that on board for future learning.

We heard from the hon. Member for Ceredigion (Ben Lake), who gave specific examples of how we should improve outcomes, and raised the importance of training and awareness of foetal movements, and improvements in ultrasound scanning. The hon. Member for Banbury (Victoria Prentis) gave a wide-ranging speech. She always speaks with great personal knowledge and authority on this matter. She said that media coverage of this issue was pretty impressive and very sensitive, and that there was much more of it. She spoke positively, as did every Member who contributed, about the impact of the pathway. However, she pointed out that only 46% of maternity units provide mandatory bereavement training, some of which lasts only an hour or less. She was right to talk about the impact on staff of some of the issues with which they have to deal. She was right to highlight the fact that of course we need more midwives and that the focus should not just be on recruitment but on retention, and the serious challenges not just in midwifery but across the NHS workforce.

My hon. Friend the Member for Coatbridge, Chryston and Bellshill (Hugh Gaffney) spoke from personal experience, and I thank him for doing so. He again raised access to mental health support and the lack of bereavement facilities in all units. He discussed the Bumblebee charity in his constituency, which was another example of how individuals turned their own experiences into a force for good. He ended with a tribute to his mother, who had to deal with stillborn babies in, presumably, the early years of the NHS, when things were treated very differently. We ought to pay credit to the service that she gave to the health service in a very different era for dealing with these issues.
It was a pleasure, as always, to hear from the hon. Member for Colchester (Will Quince), who gave a wide-ranging and compelling speech. He spoke about why it was important that we talk about these issues. No matter how short someone's life, it is incredibly important to the parents. He will know of my own constituent, Nicole Bowles—the badge that I am wearing gives a signal that someone has suffered child bereavement and it is all right to talk about it. That is a really important message that we cannot repeat enough: it is okay to talk about these things, because it helps to raise awareness and discuss matters.

The hon. Gentleman was crystal clear that we need bereavement suites in every unit up and down the country, and he was right about having more midwifery training. He made a very fair point, which I presume comes from his own personal experience, about continuing support for parents when they are dealing with subsequent pregnancies. One can only imagine the anxiety that they face throughout the whole pregnancy in that situation, and I am sure the Minister will reflect on that. The hon. Gentleman also made one of the strongest arguments I have heard in support of international aid and what a difference it can make to tackling baby loss around the world.

The hon. Member for Caithness, Sutherland and Easter Ross (Jamie Stone) eloquently reminded us that this issue affects grandparents and the wider family, as well as the parents. The hon. Member for Sleaford and North Hykeham (Dr Johnson) spoke from her professional background and experience when she said that the first question the parents always ask is, “Why?” and the second question is, “What can be done to prevent this happening again?” We have heard countless stories of parents taking that second question and using it as a force for good. She raised, as she did in the last debate, the impact on families of having to go to specialist units a long way from their homes, and I hope the Minister will reflect on that. She was also right to highlight the recent increase in sudden infant death syndrome, which is of great concern and is certainly perplexing.

The hon. Member for Strangford (Jim Shannon) spoke with great sincerity about his own family’s experiences. He drew a contrast between how his mother’s generation dealt with such issues and how we are beginning to talk about them much more openly today. He was right to say that we are all probably connected in some way to someone who has suffered such a loss.

As we have heard, today’s debate coincides with the 16th year of Baby Loss Awareness Week, which is an important opportunity for us all to unite with bereaved parents and their families and friends to commemorate the lives of babies who died during, before or shortly after birth. I echo the comments made in praise of the more than 60 charities that now collaborate on this week. When I first spoke on this subject two years ago, around 40 charities were involved. That increase in numbers shows what an impact this week has had on raising awareness and bringing people together, which is what we want to see. Each of those organisations should be extremely proud of what they do and of the way they work together to drive through change on a national basis. It seems to be a characteristic of this issue that personal tragedy moves people to go to huge lengths to help others in the same position. In doing so, they display extraordinary levels of courage and resilience, and I pay tribute to them all.

As well as using today’s debate to raise awareness, this is an opportunity to take stock of progress and once again highlight the fact that although excellent care is available in the country, it is not available to everyone everywhere. It has been said many times before and during the debate that one of the key challenges for the Government is to tackle regional disparities. In England alone, there is still a 25% variation in stillbirths. Although there has been a reduction in the stillbirth rate and the perinatal mortality rate, it is quite a slight one, and sadly the neonatal mortality rate in England and Wales has increased two years in a row.

While we can rightly say that we are beginning to improve the approach to those dealing with the consequences of baby loss, it seems that we still have a long way to go in understanding and really tackling the causes of it. The example we have heard a number of times today is that 15 babies every single day are stillborn or do not live past the first month, and it is believed from studies that up to 80% of those deaths could be avoided. As the hon. Member for Colchester said, too many deaths remain unexplained, and as many Members have said, we are still a long way behind where we should be in terms of prevention. According to the report, the annual rate of stillbirth reduction in the UK has been slower than in the vast majority of comparable high-income countries.

One measure that may hopefully make inroads into improving outcomes is the maternity safety training fund, but as a one-off limited fund, it was by definition restricted. I raised the concern last year that time might not be found for the training to reach all those who would benefit from it, so it was disappointing to hear from Baby Lifeline that workforce pressures meant that many staff could not access the training available under the scheme. It gave clear examples of where the training given has improved outcomes, but this must not be the end of the story. The fund needs to be repeated on an annual basis and, crucially, staff need to be given the time and space to take advantage of what is on offer.

In many areas of the NHS, workforce challenges are the biggest barrier to improving outcomes. The “Bliss baby report 2015: hanging in the balance” stated that 64% of neonatal units did not have enough nurses to meet safe staffing levels and 70% of units looked after more babies than is considered safe. That was three years ago, and on many indicators the staffing situation is more acute now than it was then. We know that we have a shortfall in nurses of more than 40,000. We have more nurses and midwives leaving the register than joining it, and registrations by people from the European economic area are dropping dramatically. We know that the demographics of the existing workforce are not in our favour, which is why the retention issues raised are so important. I would be grateful if the Minister updated us in his concluding comments on whether any progress has been made to improve the figures that Bliss set out in 2015.

It is also worth considering staffing challenges in the context of the worthy aim of introducing a continuity of carer model, when even the modest target of 20% of women being covered by March 2019 looks challenging. Can the Minister say whether we are on track to meet that and when he anticipates there being full coverage? There is ample evidence to show that continuity of care can make a big difference to outcomes as well as the patient experience.
Finally, I want to say a few words about the national bereavement care pathway, as it has been rightly trumpeted this evening. It is clearly making a big difference on the ground, but it needs to be rolled out comprehensively as soon as possible. The Prime Minister indicated some time ago that it would be rolled out nationally by about this time. Again, I wonder whether the Minister can update us on that ambition.

In conclusion, the debates that we have had over the last few years, and again tonight, underline the importance of the work undertaken by hon. Members and the many charities in the sector. It means that the silence that we talk about is now beginning to end. It is not possible to overstate how courageous those who have spoken out about their personal experiences are or how influential those interventions have proven to be. Having now spoken out, we must continue to talk about what we need to do to improve outcomes. This year my council will be joining the wave of light, and I am hopeful that other public buildings in my constituency will join in—I am doing what I can to encourage them. Such symbolism can only increase public awareness of this subject, and if actions like that reach just one grieving parent who may have felt that they were alone, but who now feels that they have someone to turn to, then it will have been worth it.

8.36 pm

The Minister for Health (Stephen Barclay): May I join colleagues across the House in paying tribute to my hon. Friend the Member for Eddisbury (Antoinette Sandbach) for securing this debate on Baby Loss Awareness Week? It is particularly appropriate, as today marks the start of the 2018 campaign. How we reduce the numbers of baby losses is an issue that unites the House, as has been very much reflected in the tenor of this evening’s debate. May I also say to my hon. Friend the Member for Colchester (Will Quince) that I am sure that all in the Chamber will be thinking of Robert and him on Friday, as he marks that particularly poignant fourth anniversary?

My hon. Friend the Member for Eddisbury raised a number of important points in her speech, including about the national bereavement care pathway and the ongoing investigations at the three hospitals in England and Wales. I will address those shortly. She is right to recognise the higher profile that this issue has received in recent years, this being the third such debate in the last three years. That is very much testament to the work of the all-party group on baby loss and in particular my hon. Friend the Members for Eddisbury, for Colchester and for Banbury (Victoria Prentis), who is not in her place, the hon. Member for Washington and Sunderland West (Mrs Hodgson), to whom my opposite number correctly paid tribute and who very much moved the House in a previous debate, and the hon. Member for North Ayrshire and Arran (Patricia Gibson), who quite rightly spoke of Kenneth, who is very much in her thoughts and reflects much of the work that she has done in this place. The hon. Member for Caithness, Sutherland and Easter Ross (Jamie Stone) also made the point very well that this issue affects the family as a whole, including grandparents.

Martin Docherty-Hughes (West Dunbartonshire) (SNP): I join the Minister in congratulating all the Members who have brought this issue to the Floor of the House today and especially the hon. Member for Eddisbury (Antoinette Sandbach) on securing the debate. The Minister has talked about the family, and we have heard much about the emotional journey for mothers and fathers who experience loss. We are living now in a more equal society, in which more lesbian women are becoming mothers, and they, too, experience loss through the death of a baby or young child. Will he ensure that that is reflected in the opportunities to learn about the lived experience of mothers, to which my hon. and good friend the Member for North Ayrshire and Arran (Patricia Gibson) referred, whether they have a husband or a wife?

Stephen Barclay: The hon. Gentleman makes a valid point. He will have noticed that my colleague the Minister for Women and Equalities was in the Chamber for part of the debate, and I am sure that those sentiments are very much reflected in the work that she is doing. I am very happy to work with him to ensure that the Government’s approach takes those points on board.

Before coming to the wider areas of progress and considering what still needs to be done to deliver the improvements that we all want to see, I will address some of the specific comments made by Members across the House. My hon. Friend the Member for Colchester rightly mentioned the inconsistency between trusts. I understand that Sands is asking for the national bereavement care pathway to be included in the CQC’s inspection framework for maternity. I am happy to write to the CQC to request that this becomes part of the inspection regime. I think that can build on the point my hon. Friend the Member for Eddisbury made about recent progress in Medway.

My hon. Friend the Member for Colchester also suggested a training module for midwives on bereavement. Again, I am happy to write to Professor Ian Cummings, the chief executive of Health Education England, on that point and to share the correspondence with the all-party parliamentary group. One of the objectives of the pregnancy loss review is to recommend options to improve maternity care practice for parents who experience baby loss, so that is part of that work.

My hon. Friend the Member for Sleaford and North Hykeham (Dr Johnson), who so often brings her clinical expertise to debates, raised the issue of travel costs. The Patient Advice and Liaison Service can advise on eligibility for schemes, as this tends to be specific to individual trusts, but it can apply in certain instances, particularly when linked to benefit entitlement.

My hon. Friend the Member for Gloucester (Richard Graham), who is no longer in his place, mentioned the important work of the hospital chaplaincy, and I think that Members on both sides of the House recognise the support that chaplains can offer following baby loss. Indeed, the bereavement care pathway guidance recommends offering parents contact with the chaplaincy team, so the role of the chaplaincy will be given greater visibility as the pathway is rolled out across more trusts.

The hon. Member for Ellesmere Port and Neston (Justin Madders) rightly mentioned midwife numbers. We recognise that the workforce do face pressure, as is reflected in the 25% increase in the number of midwifery
training places that the Government are committed to. Indeed, numbers have increased in each of the last four years. But he makes a valid point and we are focused on dealing with the workforce pressures.

As a number of Members have recognised, the Government have a clear ambition to halve the rates of stillbirths, neonatal and maternal deaths and brain injuries that occur during or soon after birth by 2025, and to achieve at least a 20% reduction in these rates by 2020. Since the launch of the national maternity ambition in 2015, the Government have introduced a range of evidence-based interventions to support maternity and neonatal services, under the leadership of the maternity safety champions, who are responsible for promoting safety in their organisations.

I am pleased to report that we remain on course to achieve our 2020 ambition. The stillbirth rate in England fell from 5.1 to 4.1 per 1,000 births between 2010 and 2017, representing a decrease of almost 20%, which equates to 827 fewer stillbirths. We currently have the lowest stillbirth rate on record. The neonatal mortality rate also fell from 2.9 to 2.8 per 1,000 live births between 2010 and 2016. Many Members will be aware that multiple pregnancies are at greater risk of perinatal death, so I welcome the findings in a recent MBRRACE-UK report showing that the stillbirth rate for UK twins almost halved between 2014 and 2016, with a fall of 44%. In addition, neonatal deaths among UK twins has dropped by 30%.

There are areas of progress, but as my hon. Friend the Member for Cholchester rightly said, part of the focus of today’s debate is on the areas where we need to improve, not just on the areas where there has been progress. One key area relates to ethnic minority groups, where we know stillbirth and neonatal mortality rates are increasing rather than decreasing. The Government continue to work with others to develop and implement policies to tackle such inequalities. This is an area on which we would be very happy to work with the APPG. It is an issue of concern to Members on all sides of the House.

A number of Members raised the role of the Healthcare Safety Investigation Branch and the importance of identifying where there are lessons to be learned. My hon. Friend the Member for Slough, North Hykeham is right that clinicians must be free to speak up where mistakes have been made. Indeed, the former Secretary of State championed that in his work on patient safety. It is also why we are improving investigations into term stillbirths. There is a role for the Royal College of Obstetricians and Gynaecologists in terms of the Each Baby Counts programme. Considerable work is under way, part of which, as my hon. Friend the Member for Eddisbury recognised, is on ensuring that in respect of the investigations at the specific hospitals she mentioned the appropriate lessons are learned. She will appreciate that, as they are live investigations, I cannot comment on them in detail.

Evidence demonstrates that women who have a midwife-led continuity model of care are less likely to suffer baby loss. In March, the Secretary of State pledged that most women will receive such care throughout pregnancy, labour and birth by 2021, with 20%, or about 130,000 women, benefiting by 2019. This will help to bolster maternity safety and further improve care standards.

It is positive to see the impact that many initiatives can have on reducing baby loss, but the Government recognise the need to improve the care bereaved families experience. That is why the Under-Secretary of State for Health and Social Care, my hon. Friend the Member for Thurrock (Jackie Doyle-Price), the Minister with responsibility for maternity care, recently announced full funding of £106,000 to the charity Sands to continue the roll-out of the national bereavement care pathway. I hope that reassures my hon. Friend the Member for Eddisbury that the value of the care pathway is very much recognised within Government. As my hon. Friend mentioned, this initiative has seen a positive response from parents and medical professionals, with 77% of professionals saying bereavement care has improved.

On pregnancy loss and the pregnancy loss review, which my Department commissioned earlier this year, the review has been considering the question of whether legislation should provide new rights to bereaved parents to register pre-24-week pregnancy loss, as well as investigating the impact of such losses on families and how care can be improved for parents who experience it. That review is currently scheduled to be completed in the new year. A number of very important points on that pre-24-week period were raised.

The Department of Health and Social Care and the Ministry of Justice have been consulting with coroners, patients’ groups and charities to consider the role of the coroner in relation to stillbirths. This is about ensuring that bereaved parents are given a full account of the events leading up to the loss of their baby and that important lessons are learned. The hon. Member for Nottingham South (Lilian Greenwood) in particular made a point on the role of coroners in an intervention. This work will continue over the coming months.

In conclusion, progress is being made. I think that was recognised in a number of the speeches this evening, particularly in respect of: the commitment to fund in full the national roll-out of the bereavement care pathway in 2018-19, for which guidance and resources have been released today; the ongoing pregnancy loss review, which is due to report in early 2019; the work being done by the Department of Health and Social Care and the Ministry of Justice regarding the role of the coroner in investigating stillbirths; the progression of the private Member’s Bill, which will have its Third Reading on 26 October, promoted by my hon. Friend the Member for East Worthing and Shoreham (Tim Loughton) on those last two issues; and the recent passage of the Parental Bereavement (Leave and Pay) Act 2018, mentioned by a number of Members, through the work of my hon. Friend the Member for Thirsk and Malton (Kevin Hollinrake).

I would like to close by making it clear that the Government are actively listening to concerns on this issue. This issue unites the House. On behalf of the Government, I very much look forward to working with the APPG, and Members across the House, to ensure that the progress we have seen in recent years continues, so that we can all tackle the most appalling loss that the families we represent can face.

8.49 pm

Antoinette Sandbach: It is a pleasure to follow the Minister and the commitments he has made. As he said, this issue unites the House. The hon. Member for North
Ayshire and Arran (Patricia Gibson) spoke about her dread about today’s debate, as did my hon. Friend the Member for Banbury (Victoria Prentis), and I did not go to sleep last night because of the worry and the feelings that it brings back. But the hon. Member for North Ayshire and Arran also spoke about the optimism for this year and what we have achieved in the past three years. As the Opposition spokesman said, personal tragedy moves people to go to enormous lengths, and we have heard from Members across the House about constituents who have gone to enormous lengths to try and build on their experiences, ensure that lessons have been learned and make sure that things are better for those who follow.

Three themes emerged from the debate. The first, which is where we started three years ago, is about breaking the silence. My hon. Friend the Member for Colchester (Will Quince), in the week in which Robert has his fourth birthday, spoke about taking on the taboo of speaking about childhood death. We have all taken on that taboo in this House. Each year, different aspects of it emerge. The hon. Member for Caithness, Sutherland and Easter Ross (Jamie Stone) spoke about his mother suffering in silence. So many people have suffered in silence; indeed, the hon. Member for Strangford (Jim Shannon) had his mother and sister share that experience. We are breaking that taboo, we are breaking that silence, working together with those 60 charities that cover all sorts of loss and that are embedded in our communities and supporting our constituents who have been through this.

There is some optimism and hope in Baby Loss Awareness Week, not least because on Saturday we have the wave of light, which travels across the world as parents light candles in memory of their children. The hon. Member for Coatbridge, Chryston and Bellshill (Hugh Gaffney) also spoke about the role of his mother. At that point in time, with the newly emerging NHS, looking after what are commonly referred to as angel babies must have been very difficult, and I know that my own mother suffered in silence from her own experience, although she was not looking after stillborn babies. That work is important, as was the work of his constituent, Gordon, with Bumblebee Babies.

The second theme was pregnancy support. The hon. Member for Ceredigion (Ben Lake) spoke about this, and particularly about ultrasound scanning in the third trimester. I campaigned on that in Wales when I was an elected Member of the Welsh Assembly, and I urge him to work with his colleagues in the devolved Assembly to try to deliver it. Ultrasound scans in the third trimester have been proven in other jurisdictions to reduce stillbirth and neonatal death, and they can make an important contribution to the debate going forward. He also spoke about the work of Gareth and Clare in memory of Mari-Leisa.

My hon. Friend the Member for Sleaford and North Hykeham (Dr Johnson) was the only Member to mention Group B Strep Support, which forms an incredibly important part of this debate. A test for group B strep can be done for £11, and people can discover whether or not their baby might be vulnerable to it. That is an area that we can perhaps work on. I am grateful to her for raising the matter, in the light of her clinical experience, and I know that other Members of the House have campaigned on it.

The hon. Member for North Ayshire and Arran said that prevention was the key. Pregnancy support—both around smoking and for BAME communities, who are, as the Minister mentioned, particularly vulnerable—is absolutely critical to that. The MAMA Academy wellbeing wallets have been used in the Countess of Chester Hospital trust, and they recently saved two lives. Because the women had on the front of their medical notes the areas of concern that they should look at, they went and sought help, and there are two babies alive today who might not otherwise have been. Prevention is key.

The third theme that came out of today’s debate was post-bereavement care and support. The Government have made huge strides, working together with the third sector. The best abilities of the third sector have been harnessed together with the drive and ambition of the Department of Health to deliver the national bereavement care pathway, and that is a really good example of co-operative working. I think it will lead to a huge change in the quality of care and help to end the postcode lottery that parents face.

I know that the previous Secretary of State for Health was absolutely committed to the idea that health professionals should not close ranks to try to protect other health professionals when things go wrong. The idea is to promote transparency and openness. As my hon. Friend the Member for Sleaford and North Hykeham said, it is about the “why?”—the desire to find out why something happened and make sure that it does not happen to anyone else. I think we should take forward such positive learning experiences to help to reduce the number of neonatal deaths, stillbirths and perinatal losses. There is work to be done, but there is much to celebrate. Many other events are taking place during Baby Loss Awareness Week, and I urge Members to get involved in them.

Madam Deputy Speaker (Dame Eleanor Laing): Thank you. It has been an excellent, honest and constructive debate.

Question put and agreed to.

Resolved.

That this House has considered baby loss awareness week 2018.
**Business Rates: Small Retail Businesses**

*Motion made, and Question proposed. That this House do now adjourn.—(Jo Churchill.)*

8.58 pm

**Sir Geoffrey Clifton-Brown** (The Cotswolds) (Con): I am privileged to follow the emotional and sensitive debate secured by my hon. Friend the Member for Eddisbury (Antoinette Sandbach). I sometimes wish the public could see more of such debates, where sensitive subjects are discussed so constructively on a completely apolitical, non-partisan basis. I congratulate my hon. Friend.

Madam Deputy Speaker, I am grateful to you and Mr Speaker for scheduling this important Adjournment debate on reforming the business rates system for small retail businesses. I am particularly grateful to the Paymaster General and Financial Secretary to the Treasury, my right hon. Friend the Member for Central Devon (Mel Stride) for being here to answer this debate at such a late hour, when I am sure he would much rather be at home with his family.

I am quite sure that right hon. and hon. Members from both sides of the House will agree with me when I say that protecting our country’s small businesses is of paramount importance. There are more than 5.7 million small and medium-sized enterprises in the UK, and we must recognise their importance to the local economies of all our constituencies in providing much-needed jobs for our constituents.

I have been working closely with the British Independent Retailers Association and with many businesses in my constituency to promote their business rates reform proposals. It is an eminently sensible idea for the so-called small business rate relief, which has a £12,000 threshold and has to be claimed, to be replaced by an allowance required by some of the businesses in the hon. Lady’s constituency. For example, furniture shops, bed shops and cycle shops need large premises, which inevitably means large rateable values, but they do not necessarily have the turnover to match those rateable values. The ability to pay is not necessarily reflected in the rates that must be paid. However, I sympathise with the hon. Lady.

The national decline of the British high street is a worrying trend. More than 8,000 shops have closed over the last 18 months, and one in eight high-street shop units in England and Wales now stands empty. Large shopping centres away from town centres qualify for much lower rates than smaller retailers on our high streets, owing to their peripheral locations. That, of course, does not take into account the significantly higher turnover of retailers such as the “big four” supermarkets.

**Rachael Maskell** (York Central) (Lab/Co-op): Will the hon. Gentleman give way?

**Jim Shannon** (Strangford) (DUP): Will the hon. Gentleman give way?

**Sir Geoffrey Clifton-Brown**: My golly! I will give way to both hon. Members, but I will give way to the hon. Lady first.

**Rachael Maskell**: I am grateful to the hon. Gentleman, who is making an excellent speech. In York, there are 47 empty units in the centre of our city, partly because of high valuation rates. Offshore landlords are more concerned with their investments than the revenue from the rentals, so they keep pushing up the rents. Does the hon. Gentleman agree that the whole system needs to change if order is to be restored?

**Sir Geoffrey Clifton-Brown**: Yes. The whole thrust of my speech is that we shall ultimately need to reform the rates system, but it will take time. The Government have to be very careful to guard the huge amount of revenue that they gain from the rates in any change that they make. I am sure that my right hon. Friend the Financial Secretary will have something to say about my proposals in that respect.

I have a problem in the Cotswolds. The rents are very high, which influences the rateable value. It takes time to deal with that when there are a number of empty units, such as the ones in York that the hon. Lady mentioned. When the rents are lowered the rateable values follow, but the district valuers are, of course, reluctant to lower the rateable values because they do not want to lose revenue. That problem is increasing, as I shall explain shortly. Offline businesses, IT businesses and so on, do not need premises as large as those required by some of the businesses in the hon. Lady’s constituency. For example, furniture shops, bed shops and cycle shops need large premises, which inevitably means large rateable values, but they do not necessarily have the turnover to match those rateable values. The ability to pay is not necessarily reflected in the rates that must be paid. However, I sympathise with the hon. Lady.

**Jim Shannon**: I thank the hon. Gentleman for raising this issue, which is a problem in my constituency as well as others. He referred to a national decline, and the evidence of that is very clear: planning portals in local areas show a downturn in the number of businesses applying for extensions and renovations. Does he agree that that is because businesses cannot expand because of costs, and does he agree that a review of business rates might just allow some companies to take the plunge, upgrade their businesses, sow into them and, hopefully, reap the benefits, rather than continually treading water—as they often do—just to keep afloat?

**Sir Geoffrey Clifton-Brown**: I entirely agree, and I will shortly demonstrate the way in which the current rates system is a disincentive for small businesses to expand. Surely what we should be doing, in the entire economy, is encouraging small businesses that will one day become medium-sized businesses, and will hopefully one day become large businesses, employing more people, selling more goods, and exporting more goods around the world. That is exactly what we want to see in a dynamic UK economy, particularly in the post-Brexit era. We need to look very carefully at the rates system, which is why I initiated this debate.

The hon. Member for York Central (Rachael Maskell) was talking about the relationship between the ability to pay and the rates payable. I do not want to knock the banks as I have great regard for them, but I was shocked to hear that HSBC has six banks in London alone that qualify for small business rate relief. I am sure that HSBC would not have those banks open
unless they were making a good profit. That is an excellent demonstration of how the rates payable are not related to the profits a business makes.

I am not for one second questioning the importance of competition in the marketplace, but to reverse the decline of our high streets we must ensure that competition is fair in every respect, and if the rates system is making it unfair, we should look at reforming it. There is a stark example in my constituency in the beautiful town of Stow-on-the-Wold. The large edge-of-town Tesco store is excellent; I go there myself to shop. It is only a five-minute walk from the town centre and pays business rates of £220 per square metre. However, a small independent delicatessen, with much higher costs because it occupies a listed building and which, no doubt, as the hon. Member for Strangford (Jim Shannon) made. The majority of small businesses growing from one premises to a second will lose the existing small business rate relief, which has a negative effect on business growth. This quirk in the rules means that a business can receive full relief if it has a single property with a rateable value of £12,000 or less, but a business with two properties each with a value of £3,000 would not receive any relief. That is clearly unfair and discourages businesses from expanding to more than one site.

I have another constituency example. The beautiful village of Guiting Power contains two pubs: The Hollow Bottom and The Farmers Arms. You might like to come and sample them, Madam Deputy Speaker, to see whether what I am saying is true. The Farmers Arms recently invested a significant amount of capital into the business and is now a very nice gastropub. However, The Hollow Bottom remains a traditional Cotswolds pub, much loved by many of my constituents. Unfortunately, even though The Farmers Arms and The Hollow Bottom started as the same size and as roughly similar businesses, because they are both in the same village only The Hollow Bottom now receives business rates relief because it is not possible for two pubs in the same village to receive the relief whatever the circumstances, and The Hollow Bottom is regarded as the smaller of the two pubs and is therefore the pub designated for relief. It would be helpful to understand why this inequality exists and how business rates could be reformed to promote, rather than penalise, investment.

It is troubling that the current rates system in certain respects discourages, and even stifles, investment by penalising ratepayers who invest in their business, as I have just demonstrated with The Hollow Bottom pub. For example, if a business owner were to add an air conditioning unit or CCTV cameras to their business, their rates bill would increase. To tackle this, time-limited exemptions for new store developments should be provided. I am keen to understand from the Minister what steps the Government are taking in linking business rates more closely to a company’s turnover, not just its physical size. As I indicated to the hon. Member for York Central, I find the example of a large IT firm pertinent. Such a business requires, by turnover, much less space compared with a cycle shop, a furniture shop or a bed shop, which would inevitably have a lower turnover but require more space.

In the last revaluation announced by my right hon. Friend the Chancellor, the Government did offer some help to smaller businesses by doubling the threshold from £6,000 to £12,000, and I want to make it absolutely clear to my right hon. Friend the Minister that I am not carping about the reliefs that are currently available. Many of the small businesses in my constituency, and in those of other hon. Members, benefit from small business rate relief. However, this does not help the majority of my retailers, who are above that level. The average rateable value in this country is £34,000.

To provide further detail, the new allowance proposals that I support—as opposed to the relief that businesses have to claim—would be based on the same principles as the personal allowance currently applied to income tax. This is a pragmatic, pro-business solution that would simplify the tax system and significantly cut the burdensome tax levels that small retailers are facing. A simple allowance, ahead of a full review of the system, would see a reduction in rates for the majority of those small businesses that qualify for the relief and that are struggling with their tax. All those below this allowance—for example, £12,000—would be out of the system entirely, because they would not have to claim the allowance. This would cut down on the resources required to process these claims. Perhaps my right hon. Friend the Minister has a figure in mind for the Government’s current compliance cost for processing small business rate relief claims. That compliance cost affects not only the Government; in percentage terms, it is even more burdensome for the small businesses that have to claim the relief, because they often need to employ specialist professional practitioners to enable them to claim the tax satisfactorily and not have their claim disallowed.

An additional benefit of introducing such an allowance, as opposed to a threshold, would be the simplification of the relief system. In other words, there would no longer be any need for small business rates relief as there would be a standard application for all small qualifying businesses across the country. Furthermore, the small business relief system currently costs the Government £2.6 billion. Introducing such an allowance and erasing the £2.6 billion in rates relief—even though we would be redeploying it as an allowance—would result in businesses reducing their compliance costs. Perhaps the Minister can tell me what the compliance cost is for the Government. If not, perhaps he could ask his officials to look it up. We could then redeploy the
money involved in that compliance cost—and in the bureaucracy involved in administering the system—and perhaps consider raising the £12,000 threshold and introducing the allowance that I would prefer, so that even more small businesses could benefit. I, and I am sure all hon. Members, want to see this country’s small businesses thriving in post-Brexit Britain, and we should be encouraging small enterprises, not penalising them for wanting to expand and grow further. We should cherish the fact that 500,000 new businesses have been created under this Conservative Government in the past five years and under their predecessor coalition Government. That shows the strength of the British economy. That is why we have such full employment rates, and we need to keep it that way. We need to keep employing as many of our constituents as possible, particularly the youngsters, and to encourage them to consider forming their own businesses. As I have said, from small businesses come medium-sized and large businesses. This country has always been full of entrepreneurs. I have great optimism for the future, post-Brexit, but we need my right hon. Friend the Minister and his team in the Treasury to consider the fairness of the current rating system. I am grateful to you, Madam Deputy Speaker, for allowing me to say these few words tonight.

9.14 pm

The Financial Secretary to the Treasury (Mel Stride): Madam Deputy Speaker, may I say what a pleasure it is to see you in the Chair after the recess? It is also a pleasure to realise that I have an hour and 16 minutes in which to address my response to my hon. Friend the Member for The Cotswolds (Sir Geoffrey Clifton-Brown), but I may cut it down just a little bit to please the Member for The Cotswolds (Sir Geoffrey Clifton-Brown), Madam Deputy Speaker, for allowing me to say these few words tonight.

I thank my hon. Friend for bringing this important debate to the House tonight. It is entirely characteristic of him that such a debate is in his name, because throughout his parliamentary career he has been a strong advocate of business both across the country and in his constituency. He was right to highlight in his opening remarks the sheer size and importance of our small business community—there are 5.7 million small businesses, a figure that he cited—and the recent growth that we have had under the coalition Government and this Government. He has worked closely with the British Independent Retailers Association on various thoughts and proposals, some of which he put forward this evening and to which I shall respond in due course.

My hon. Friend is right that business rates are an important tax. When we consulted on business rates back in 2015 and considered the various alternatives, several different suggestions were made, such as turnover taxes, taxes on gross value added and so on. Inevitably, with every kind of measure or metric that one focused on, they had their own particular drawbacks and complexities and so on. The conclusion that was reached at the time was that business rates were a stable tax that is difficult to avoid because property is static by definition. Of course, as my hon. Friend also rightly pointed out, business rates raise around £25 billion a year, which is a significant contribution to our public services and funds, in turn, our doctors, nurses, policemen and policewomen and so on.

The Government recognise that business rates represent a high pressure on small businesses, particularly for high street retailers. Rates are a fixed cost that cannot be avoided, irrespective of whether a business is profitable or otherwise, which is why we have undertaken a series of important measures. In the 2016 Budget, we made 100% small business rate relief permanent, at that time increasing the threshold for the relief and taking 655,000 of the smallest businesses out of business rates altogether. We also increased the threshold for the standard multiplier, taking 250,000 properties, including most high street shops, out of the higher rate of business rates.

However, that is not all. Following the most recent property revaluation in 2017, we introduced a £3.6 billion transitional relief scheme to cap and phase in bill increases. Additionally, at spring Budget 2017, we announced an extra £435 million to support those businesses facing the steepest increases in bills, including £110 million to support 16,000 small businesses losing small business rate relief or rural rate relief to limit increases in their bills to the greater of £600 a year or the real-terms transitional relief cap for small businesses in each year. We also provided local authorities with £300 million of funding for discretionary relief to support individual cases in their local area.

In parallel to all that, we have taken significant steps to ensure the fairness of the business rates system as a whole. That is why, at spring Budget 2017, the Chancellor announced that we would reform the revaluation process to make it fairer. I am pleased to say that we have delivered on that by increasing the frequency of business rates revaluations from five years to every three years, following the next revaluation. That is an important point in the context of what my hon. Friend said about the difference in the rates being paid by the out-of-town store and by retailers on the high street. If we can have more frequent revaluations, as rateable values on the high street perhaps fall, we can more quickly pass on the benefit of that within the system.

Rachael Maskell: Does the Minister recognise that inequality exists between property size and turnover and that online businesses do not have the same huge valuations as retailers on the high street? Therefore, there is a complete dissociation between the success of a business and its ability to pay under a rateable system, whether that system is based on turnover or profitability, as opposed to a system that is dependent on an external landlord and the rents that they are charging for their property.

Mel Stride: The hon. Lady will probably be aware of the Chancellor’s speech at our recent party conference, in which he spoke quite strongly about the importance of a level playing field for online businesses that derive value in the United Kingdom and end up paying very little tax and about the international tax approach that we may look at taking unilaterally as a consequence. The most important thing overall is that the Government recognise that when it comes to high streets and the smaller retailers to which the hon. Lady refers, we should take measures to reduce the burden of rates, particularly among smaller businesses, in the way that I have described this evening. That makes bills fairer for many, as they more closely reflect the current rental values and relative changes in rents. To ensure that ratepayers benefit from this change at the earliest point,
the spring statement 2018 included an announcement that the next revaluation would be brought forward by one year to 2021.

Before I address some of the specific points raised by my hon. Friend, it is worth highlighting that, at autumn budget 2017, we brought forward the planned switch in the indexation of business rates from RPI to CPI by two years. This switch is worth £2.3 billion over five years, and the move to CPI is worth £4.1 billion in total by 2023. So once more, the Government are making a significant investment to recognise the pressures that rates introduce.

My hon. Friend raised the specific issue—

**Sir Geoffrey Clifton-Brown:** Before my right hon. Friend goes on to the specific BIRA proposals, may I put to him something about the out-of-town retailers, particularly supermarkets? As I explained to the House, the rateable system is based on rents payable, which one would assume in a market would sort itself out. The problem with out-of-town supermarkets is that they have a monopoly on these sites and they manage artificially to keep the rents low, so their rates are unfair compared with the in-town shops, as I have already demonstrated with my Stow-on-the-Wold example. Something needs to be looked at. I do not know whether the issue could be looked at in a revaluation system or whether legislation is needed, but it is an issue particularly when the out-of-town supermarkets are competing with the small in-town businesses. For example, the owner of a card shop recently told me that the out-of-town supermarket started selling cards and immediately put him out of business.

**Mel Stride:** I thank my hon. Friend for his intervention. I know that the Valuation Office Agency is thorough in the way in which it conducts revaluations. It is an independent agency. However, I note the point that he has made, and if he would like to write to me or meet me to discuss it in the context of potential undervaluations, I am open to doing so.

The points that my hon. Friend made included the idea of an allowance instead of the threshold. I assume that he wanted to apply that allowance to all retail businesses, and of course that would come with some cost. It would mean providing further additional relief to some companies or businesses that do not currently receive it.

**Sir Geoffrey Clifton-Brown:** I hope that I chose my wording very carefully. I said that the allowance would be applied only to businesses that qualified for small business relief. It would be nonsense automatically to give the big businesses an allowance. That would cost the Treasury, and I want to make it clear that my proposals are revenue neutral.

**Mel Stride:** I thank my hon. Friend for clarifying that point, and I am sorry that I misunderstood. He asked what the costs of compliance were under the current system and suggested that, if we changed it, we might be able to absolve ourselves from those costs and pass the benefits on to these businesses. That is certainly something that I am happy to look at and discuss with him. The overarching point is that we had a fundamental review of business rates in 2015, and many of the issues that my hon. Friend has raised were carefully looked at.

My hon. Friend said that he recognised that change would take some time, and we are likely to be considering these matters over some reasonable period. He raised the issue of the confidence of small business retailers at the moment, and this is where I would broaden the debate’s scope a little by saying that it is not just bearing down on business rates that is the mission of this Government. We also provide the employment allowance and we are bringing down small business tax rates, with corporation tax having fallen from 28% in 2010 to 19% now and set to reduce further to 17% in time. A lot of small businesses, including retailers, will be benefiting from other measures such as fuel duty freezes. We have just announced that fuel duty will be frozen for yet another year—the ninth year in succession.

In conclusion, let me again thank my hon. Friend for this very important debate. He is focusing on one of the great challenges of our time for our high streets, which lie at the heart of our local communities. It behoves us all to do all we can to make sure they are live, whole and thriving.

**Sir Geoffrey Clifton-Brown:** I want to impress on the Minister that this problem is not going to go away. The decline of our high streets is getting worse. It is accelerating, so the Government cannot just sit back. With great respect, just providing allowances in the rating system to try to make this work means that the tax base is being eroded, because the allowances have to be provided. The Government need to look at this seriously to see how they can make the system work a little better, particularly in favour of small businesses.

**Mel Stride:** My hon. Friend is absolutely right; high streets face a variety of challenges, of which business rates is but one. One of the greatest challenges they face is the change in how we are now shopping, with just over 18% of all retail now going online; that presents a huge challenge and that number is likely to increase in time. That tells us that high streets will need to transition, reinvent themselves, change and come up with new ways to serve their local communities and drive traffic into our high streets. We recognise the importance of making sure that all those things are looked at through the planning system and the reviews we are carrying out at the moment and through the important work we have been carrying out to date. I see this debate as being very important in that regard. We will continue to keep this under review in terms of making sure we keep those cost pressures through the business rates system as low as they can be for our important high street retailers.

Question put and agreed to.

9.28 pm

House adjourned.
Oral Answers to Questions

INTERNATIONAL DEVELOPMENT

The Secretary of State was asked—

Yemen

1. Lyn Brown (West Ham) (Lab): What recent assessment she has made of the humanitarian situation in Yemen.

The Minister of State, Department for International Development (Alistair Burt): Perhaps, Mr Speaker, on behalf of those who were in the Chamber a moment ago, you might convey to the Chaplain our thanks for her preface to her prayers today. Let us hope that that spirit goes with us during what could be quite a turbulent term. Her words were well chosen.

Some 20.2 million Yemenis are estimated to need humanitarian assistance, with 8.4 million facing extreme food shortages. Insecurity and bureaucratic constraints complicate the diplomatic response. We continue to work with partners to reach the most vulnerable, and we urge all parties to ensure unhindered access through Yemen. Only a political settlement can end the humanitarian crisis.

Lyn Brown: The Minister knows that I respect him, and I am grateful to him for that answer, but the United Nations says that we are losing our fight to save lives in Yemen. Some people are so desperate that they are eating leaves, and there have been more than a million cases of cholera in the past 18 months alone. What urgent and immediate action can we in this country take to prevent such huge loss of lives?

Alistair Burt: The truth is that the Security Council has invested all its authority in the special envoy to seek the political negotiation that will end the conflict. We should all be fully behind that. When I was in New York for the recent General Assembly week, I hosted a special meeting on nutrition in Yemen. We continue to work to try to make the negotiations a success. That is where we have to put all our effort, because it is only with the end of the conflict that we can fully tackle the humanitarian crisis.

Stephen Kerr (Stirling) (Con): Some 17.8 million Yemenis have no reliable access to food and, as the Minister just told us, 8.4 million of them face extreme food shortages. What steps is the Department taking to ensure that vital UK aid can reach Yemenis in distress?

Alistair Burt: The £170 million that the United Kingdom is putting into Yemen in this financial year is currently feeding around 2.2 million people, including children. We continue to work on nutrition and sanitary issues and on making sure that clean water is available. I repeat to the House that the most important thing is that the humanitarian support and efforts to gain access are only a sticking plaster for the wound; if the wound is to be fully closed, every effort must be made on the political track to end the conflict.

Stephen Twigg (Liverpool, West Derby) (Lab/Co-op): The UK can indeed be proud of our efforts on the humanitarian side, but I agree with the Minister that we need to do more on the political track. What are we actually doing now to sustain pressure on all parties to the conflict? In particular, what are we doing to build the coalition that we need in the Security Council to secure a new resolution that is relevant to the circumstances in Yemen today?

Alistair Burt: The consensus in the Security Council is that the best thing we can do is support the envoy, because a new resolution would either not get through or not be relevant. We do not want to waste any time on efforts away from the special envoy. While we were in New York, my right hon. Friend the Foreign Secretary had a meeting with the relevant parties, and separately I met those in the coalition, as well as people representing those who have influence with the Houthis, because this is not a one-sided issue.

Kevin Foster (Torbay) (Con): The biggest tragedy of Yemen is that ultimately it is a man-made disaster that is having this appalling impact on the local population. Will the Minister confirm how the UK Government will support efforts towards a political solution, which is the only solution to these issues?

Alistair Burt: We were very supportive of the efforts of special envoy Martin Griffiths to bring the parties together in Geneva recently, and we were very disappointed and concerned that the Houthis component did not attend those negotiations. Until the negotiations are fully engaged with by all sides, we cannot proceed. All efforts must be made to support the special envoy and get the negotiations back on track.

Keith Vaz (Leicester East) (Lab): Yemen is bleeding to death. This could be the first time in modern history that an entire country has been reduced to famine and poverty by the actions, in part, of our allies. One hundred Members have signed a letter to the Prime Minister asking her to condemn further attacks on the port of Hodeidah. Will the Minister repeat today the Government’s commitment that they do not want to see any further action taken against the port, which would cause the death of a further quarter of a million people?

Alistair Burt: We have always been clear, first, that there is no military solution in Yemen, and secondly, that the port has to be kept open. There should not be action in relation to the port, either by those who might have mined the approaches to it or those who might seek to attack it, because humanitarian access remains crucial. Yemen is a tragedy of significant proportions,
as the right hon. Gentleman knows. We are doing everything we can to find the political solution to end the conflict.

Alison Thewliss (Glasgow Central) (SNP): One of the major issues is access to finance and the soaring cost of basic commodities in Yemen. The UN special envoy, Martin Griffiths, has said that the best way to resolve Yemen's humanitarian crisis is to fix the economy and stem a slide in the riyal. Are the UK Government participating in action on that matter?

Alistair Burt: Since July, the riyal has depreciated by some 20%. That, as the hon. Lady says, is putting up the prices of basic foodstuffs, which had already increased in recent years. Of course, in a war economy, people have made money: the Houthis have taxed goods and taken money from people instead of supplying goods. We are doing what we can to support the riyal, because some stability in the currency is essential. The UK is supporting that process, too.

Preet Kaur Gill (Birmingham, Edgbaston) (Lab/Co-op): Save the Children is warning that 5.2 million children in Yemen are at risk of famine; meanwhile, an estimated 350,000 children caught up in the conflict have contracted cholera since April last year. I am sure the Minister agrees that urgent action is needed. Will he inform the House what urgent steps his Department is taking to ensure that delivery of food and medicine is not hindered by warring parties for strategic gains, but instead reaches those who are in desperate need of it?

Alistair Burt: My right hon. Friend the Secretary of State has met and spoken regularly with the Minister in the United Arab Emirates responsible for coalition efforts to ensure humanitarian access. We have spoken to those who have access to the Houthis and the areas that they control to make sure there are no blockages there. It is a conflict, and it is a tragedy that access to humanitarian aid is used as a weapon in that conflict. Only a negotiated solution can end the conflict and enable the humanitarian efforts, and we are making every effort to ensure that.

Kerala: Summer Floods

2. Daniel Zeichner (Cambridge) (Lab): What steps is she taking to ensure that people in Kerala have access to clean water, sanitation and shelter after the floods of summer 2018.

Harriett Baldwin: We certainly welcome the report, and I hope the hon. Gentleman welcomes the Government's commitment to contributing £5.8 billion between 2016 and 2020 to make a difference in this area. Since 2011, 47 million people have been helped to cope with the effects of climate change and 17 million have been helped to access clean energy, but there is more to do and we will do it.

Michael Fabricant (Lichfield) (Con): Anyone who has been to Kerala knows it is a beautiful state with beautiful people. Has my hon. Friend had a chance to discuss with UK water companies their charity, WaterAid, and what they can do to help?

Harriett Baldwin: The Indian Government are of course leading on this, and I am sure that they will note my hon. Friend's suggestion. He has clearly had the pleasure of visiting that beautiful part of India. I should say that Kerala is open again for tourism, and I know that the return of tourists would be welcomed.

Chris Law (Dundee West) (SNP): The recent floods in Kerala and other natural disasters in the world tragically highlight the urgency of the global climate crisis. This week, the world's leading climate scientists stated in a landmark UN report that we have just 12 years to keep global warming to a maximum 1.5°C, and the World Bank has already committed to ending upstream oil and gas projects by 2019. Can the Minister therefore explain what possible reasons there are for the UK to continue to fund fossil fuel use, particularly in countries that are already bearing the worst brunt of climate change?

Harriett Baldwin: I am sure that the hon. Gentleman welcomes the fact that that the UK is leading in terms of our commitment to end the use of coal. We are looking closely at the Powering Past Coal Alliance and leading an effort to get more countries to sign up to that alliance. The UK is showing strong leadership on that, and he should welcome it.

Freedom of Religion or Belief

3. Mr George Howarth (Knowsley) (Lab): What plans does she have to promote the right to freedom of religion or belief in developing countries.

The Minister of State, Department for International Development (Harriett Baldwin): The UK promotes and protects the right to freedom of religion or belief internationally. Through our UK Aid Connect scheme, up to £12 million will be available over the next four years for organisations to promote the building of freedom of religion or belief.

Mr Howarth: I thank the Minister for her response. Will she give us some information about what she will do to collect better data about religious freedom and minority belief freedom in the countries where her Department supports programmes?
Harriett Baldwin: Clearly the right hon. Gentleman raises an important issue. I am delighted to be able to tell him that we are working closely with colleagues in the Foreign and Commonwealth Office on a project that will generate exactly that evidence on the persecution of religious minorities. The project’s long-term objective is to generate data to better inform international policymakers to promote freedom of religion or belief more effectively.

Dame Caroline Spelman (Meriden) (Con): Religious literacy is crucial to understanding the way in which our policies affect developing countries. I am therefore glad that the FCO has relaunched its course on that, but it is only voluntary. What more can be done to encourage DFID staff to take up such courses?

Harriett Baldwin: I pay tribute to my right hon. Friend’s work as a Church Commissioner. She will be aware that the Prime Minister has recently appointed Lord Ahmad as her special envoy on freedom of religion or belief. In that role, he has the important job of ensuring that that is taken up as widely as possible.

Mr Gregory Campbell (East Londonderry) (DUP): The Minister may be aware of a case in Pakistan involving a young woman called Asia Bibi who, under blasphemy legislation, faces the possible fate of execution in that country this week. What representations can the Minister make, as a matter of the utmost urgency, to try to ensure that common sense prevails in the Pakistani courts in that case?

Harriett Baldwin: I assure the hon. Gentleman that I will immediately raise that case with my colleague Lord Ahmad and make sure that that representation is made forthwith.

Stephen Crabb (Preseli Pembrokeshire) (Con): Pakistan is one of the largest recipients of UK aid, so does the Minister agree that along with our aid should come an expectation that the recipient should do everything in their power to improve the protection of basic universal human rights?

Harriett Baldwin: I certainly think that, in his capacity as the Prime Minister’s special envoy on freedom of religion or belief, Lord Ahmad will be making the points that my right hon. Friend raises as a matter of priority.

Kate Osamor (Edmonton) (Lab/Co-op): The most recent report from the European Parliament intergroup on freedom of religion or belief and religious tolerance states: “much of the world’s population is deprived of their right to freedom of religion or belief”. What steps are the Department undertaking to ensure the protection of minority groups in Nigeria, as the Nigerian Government are reportedly unwilling to initiate forceful action?

Harriett Baldwin: The hon. Lady is right to raise the fact that three quarters of the world’s population live in countries with high levels of government restrictions on freedom of religion or belief. Nigeria’s constitution does guarantee that freedom. When my right hon. Friend the Prime Minister recently met President Buhari she was able to raise that important issue, and I am glad the hon. Lady shares the ability to raise it in Parliament.

Kate Osamor: I feel the need to prompt the Minister. Nigeria is one of DFID’s top five recipient countries and Nigeria has been identified by both the European Parliament intergroup and the United States Commission on International Religious Freedom as a “country of concern” with regards to its poor record on upholding the right of freedom to express religion. So may I ask the Minister again to tell the House what actions her Department has in place to ensure that the Nigerian Government uphold the rights of religious minorities in the country?

Harriett Baldwin: The hon. Lady is right to raise this issue. I am sure she agrees that humanitarian assistance should always be distributed on the basis of need, disregarding any issues of race, religion and ethnicity. I assure her that we regularly raise this issue, as my right hon. Friend the Secretary of State did recently, and that there is a plan in place both at local and national level to address it.

Rohingya Women

4. Vicky Foxcroft (Lewisham, Deptford) (Lab): If she will provide additional funding to support and protect Rohingya women living in refugee camps. [906950]

5. Sandy Martin (Ipswich) (Lab): If she will provide additional funding to support and protect Rohingya women living in refugee camps. [906951]

9. Rosie Duffield (Canterbury) (Lab): If she will provide additional funding to support and protect Rohingya women living in refugee camps. [906955]

The Minister of State, Department for International Development (Alistair Burt): DFID supports organisations that help Rohingya women and has committed £129 million to the crisis overall. A third of our recent £70 million allocation is being spent on protection services, including women’s centres, emergency nutrition and midwifery care and support for survivors of gender-based violence. We will continue to explore additional funding options.

Vicky Foxcroft: Following what the UN referred to as a “frenzy of sexual violence” against Rohingya women and girls, surely the Secretary of State will agree that it is wholly unacceptable that protection services for gender violence have received only one third of the required funding under the UN’s joint response plan. What steps is his Department taking to fill this funding gap?

Alistair Burt: I have two things to say in response to the hon. Lady’s most appropriate question. First, we recognise that this appeal is underfunded. We are in the lead in relation to this and we urge other donors to come forward. Secondly, she should be aware of the care with which United Kingdom money has been used to support women in the circumstances that she has described: 30 child-friendly spaces; 19 women’s centres; and 19 sexual and reproductive health clinics. I have seen these at Kutupalong camp and I know how well used they are by women who need counselling and
support. The United Kingdom has been very clear about the importance of this as part of the support that we have provided. [Interruption.]

Mr Speaker: Order. I remind the House very gently that we are discussing the plight of Rohingya women, which is one of the most egregious plights of any people anywhere in the world and should be treated with appropriate respect.

Sandy Martin: Hundreds of thousands of people have died in what has been widely regarded as ethnic cleansing. What assurances have the UK Government sought from the Myanmar Government that the Rohingya women who return will be safe, following the memorandum of understanding with the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees, and should they not include a promise of citizenship?

Alistair Burt: When we talk to any of those in the camps, it is quite clear that they will return to Myanmar/Burma only when they feel that it is safe to do so and when they are citizens and their citizenship has been accepted. At present, I do not think that we have any confidence that any women returning to Burma under any memorandum would be in that position. Until that situation changes, the refugees will need to stay, but it is essential that those issues are dealt with in time.

Rosie Duffield: The fact-finding mission found that this was ethnic cleansing and sexual abuse. Rape was widely found. I thank the Minister for promising to seek assurance that that is being taken care of and that those women are being supported. Is there any more detail available on that, please?

Alistair Burt: The International Development Committee, which is led by the hon. Member for Liverpool, West Derby (Stephen Twigg), questioned me about that just a few weeks ago. We have details on the counselling and support that is being provided. The tragedy is that this will need to go on for some time. It seems likely that those in the camps will not be able to return soon. What is essential—the hon. Lady’s question is helpful in relation to this—is that the eye of the world does not go off this matter. The funding for the support that is needed must not be lost and people must not forget the Rohingya who are in the camps.

Antoinette Sandbach (Edgbsury) (Con): A large number of vulnerable Rohingya women and children still live in Rakhine province. What humanitarian assistance are the Government providing to those vulnerable women and girls?

Alistair Burt: My hon. Friend is correct: there is difficulty in gaining access to the Rakhine province. It has been possible for humanitarian agencies to get into only some of the province. We have sought to reshape our programme to make sure that more support is available to those who are still in Rakhine, and it should not be forgotten that they remain in a very vulnerable position.

Mary Robinson (Cheadle) (Con): These vulnerable Rohingya Muslims may be destined to spend many years as refugees in camps. In addition to the aid that has already been given, has there been any consideration of a diplomatic solution involving substantial up-front international support for refugees and for the wider region in Bangladesh to pump-prime economic and political stability?

Alistair Burt: We should always preface any remarks by expressing gratitude to the Government of Bangladesh for what they have been able to do for these most vulnerable people. Every effort is being given to the sort of diplomatic solution that will provide an answer, but it is clear from the actions of the Burma Government that this will take some time. My hon. Friend is right: we need to make sure that we keep caring for those in the camps for some period of time, because the very length of their stay will mean that they face new problems, rather than those from which they fled.

Robert Courts (Witney) (Con): What support does the Department provide for Rohingya refugees who have suffered gender-based violence?

Alistair Burt: The support that we have provided has included counselling and making available people who are able to deal with children who have been traumatised over time. It is quite clear from talking to the aid agencies on my visit that there has been an improvement in people’s condition, but of course the true horror of what they have experienced can never truly be removed until they return home.

Topical Questions

T1. [906962] Trudy Harrison (Copeland) (Con): If she will make a statement on her departmental responsibilities.

The Secretary of State for International Development (Penny Mordaunt): I hope the whole House will join me in sending our deepest condolences to those affected by the devastating situation in Indonesia. We have all seen the images of destruction and of people suffering, and the UK stands side by side with the people of Indonesia. As well as providing essential supplies and a team on the ground, the UK has now made up to £5 million available, including £2 million that will match funds raised by the Disasters Emergency Committee appeal. I thank the British public for their generosity.

Trudy Harrison: Will my right hon. Friend confirm that she will be using DFID’s existing budget to help the British overseas territories to rebuild after the devastating hurricanes?

Penny Mordaunt: If that sad event does occur, I have instructed my Department to ensure that our response in the overseas territories has a priority call on our DFID reserves—our non-ODA money. The Foreign and Commonwealth Office and the Ministry of Defence are also standing ready. We will deal with these situations as best we can, without having to make further demands on the public purse.

T2. [906964] Tonia Antoniazzi (Gower) (Lab): Does the Secretary of State share the concerns of the Minister for Europe and the Americas, the right hon. Member for Rutland and Melton (Sir Alan Duncan), about the situation in El Salvador with regard to abortion being a criminal offence, even in cases of rape? Does she agree
that if we want to tell other parts of the world not to criminalise women seeking essential healthcare, we have a duty to lead by example by urgently reforming abortion law in Northern Ireland?

**Penny Mordaunt**: I agree with the hon. Lady. The Women and Equalities Committee is looking at the issue that she raises with regard to Northern Ireland, and that will be a very helpful piece of work. The hon. Lady is right; in fact, we have some opportunities with the international women’s conference that will be taking place in part in this Chamber—I thank Mr Speaker for allowing that—to send a clear message to everyone that women’s rights matter and that we will work together to ensure that they are upheld worldwide.

**Mr Speaker**: Order. There is far too much noise in the Chamber, with a lot of very loud private conversations. Can we have a bit of hush for a south-east London knight? I call Sir David Evennett.

T5. [906966] *Sir David Evennett* (Bexleyheath and Crayford) (Con): Thank you, Mr Speaker. I was pleased to read that my right hon. Friend had introduced a new test for UK aid—no longer just proving that UK aid is spent well, but that it could not be spent any better. Can she inform the House when that test will be implemented?

**Penny Mordaunt**: My right hon. Friend is absolutely right that we are not just ensuring that the aid we provide is as effective as possible; we are introducing new tests to ensure that we are doing things that are also in the national interest. The chief economist has placed that in our aid allocation formula and we are also looking at ways of improving that.

T3. [906964] *Jessica Morden* (Newport East) (Lab): What are Ministers doing to ensure that the Government continue their commitment to improving global nutrition beyond the next 2020 nutrition summit?

**The Minister of State, Department for International Development (Alistair Burt)**: Nutrition remains at the heart of the concerns that we have for feeding the most vulnerable. I had meetings in New York with those responsible for looking ahead to the next replenishment. The United Kingdom has always been a leader in this matter and we will remain so.

T7. [906968] *Scott Mann* (North Cornwall) (Con): What steps is the Department taking to support our Commonwealth veterans, who served so bravely alongside our armed forces?

**Penny Mordaunt**: We are introducing a new programme to support our pre-independence Commonwealth veterans who have been living in poverty. There are about 7,900 of these individuals, to whom we owe an immense debt of gratitude. The new programme will ensure that they can live out the rest of their lives with their families in dignity.

T4. [906965] *Dr Rupa Huq* (Ealing Central and Acton) (Lab): Freedom of expression and democracy are aid programme headings under which we fund Bangladesh, so why has it been able to imprison and torture the acclaimed photojournalist Shahidul Alam for championing those very values? What are we doing to secure his release?

**Alistair Burt**: Once again in New York, I took part in a special session at the United Nations devoted to the pressures on journalists, led by Amal Clooney and others. We were able to state very clearly our support for those Bangladeshi journalists. Representations have been made, and will continue to be made. I met the family, who were there.

**Mrs Pauline Latham** (Mid Derbyshire) (Con): Does my right hon. Friend welcome the fact that our Prime Minister is the first Prime Minister to visit Kenya in over 30 years? She committed to help to support the next generation of energetic, ambitious young Kenyans as they seek to build a more prosperous country in the years ahead.

**Penny Mordaunt**: I was absolutely delighted by the Prime Minister’s visit, and I congratulate my hon. Friend on her appointment as trade envoy to Kenya. If we want to eradicate global poverty, trade is part of the answer, and we are absolutely right to put that investment into Africa, as it will lever in an additional £4 billion to grow the economies of those developing nations.

T8. [906969] *Daniel Zeichner* (Cambridge) (Lab): In the week in which the UK hosts a major international conference on the illegal wildlife trade, will the Minister tell us what her Department is doing to tackle that international crime?

**The Minister of State, Department for International Development (Harriett Baldwin)**: The hon. Gentleman is absolutely right—the UK is leading the world by hosting the summit this week, and it is at the forefront of tackling this heinous crime. I am delighted to announce to Parliament that there will be a further £6 million uplift to the illegal wildlife trade challenge fund, and more money for the international action against corruption programme to tackle illicit financial flows that are linked to the illegal wildlife trade.

**Jack Lopresti** (Filton and Bradley Stoke) (Con): Does my hon. Friend share my concern about the Palestinian Authority’s continuing naming of schools after terrorists and the payment of salaries to convicted murderers? Can we be sure that UK taxpayers are not facilitating payments?

**Alistair Burt**: My hon. Friend can be absolutely sure that we share his concern in relation to this. The matter is continually raised with the Palestinian Authority. I had meetings in New York with those responsible for looking ahead to the next replenishment. The United Kingdom has always been a leader in this matter and we will remain so.

**PRIME MINISTER**

The Prime Minister was asked—

Engagements

Q1. [906970] *Joanna Cherry* (Edinburgh South West) (SNP): If she will list her official engagements for Wednesday 10 October.
The Prime Minister (Mrs Theresa May): Immediately after Prime Minister’s questions I, along with other Members of the House, will watch a parade by 120 members of the British Army to Parliament. They represent the breadth of the 50,000 regular and reserve Army personnel. This is an opportunity for us to thank them for their tireless work to keep our country safe.

This afternoon, I will host a reception for World Mental Health Day. I am delighted that this week the UK hosted the first ever global ministerial summit on mental health, with a landmark agreement to achieve equity for mental health.

This morning, I had meetings with ministerial colleagues and others. In addition to my duties in the House I shall have further such meetings later today.

Joanna Cherry: The Polish community has long made a valuable contribution to Scottish society. My Polish constituent is a young man who has lived in Scotland since he was six, but when he applied for jobseeker’s allowance last month, he failed the habitual residence test. Even the Department for Work and Pensions cannot understand the Kafkaesque letter that he has been sent. Like the Windrush scandal, is this the shape of things to come for EU citizens in the United Kingdom?

The Prime Minister: As the hon. and learned Lady knows, as part of the negotiations with the European Union we have already come to agreements about the rights that will be available to those EU citizens who are already living in the United Kingdom. We have set out very clearly what will be the situation for those who come to the United Kingdom during the implementation period. I was able to update people a few weeks ago to make it clear that in a no-deal arrangement we will also ensure that we look after those EU citizens who have come and made their home here. As for the individual case, I am sure that the Department for Work and Pensions will look into that in some detail.

Q5. [906974] Mrs Pauline Latham (Mid Derbyshire) (Con): What steps are the Government taking to encourage more tourists to enjoy the performing arts outside London?

The Prime Minister: I thank my hon. Friend for highlighting the performing arts and the fact that there are some great performing arts to be seen around the country. She is a performing arts ambassador, and I congratulate her on her work. We are committed to supporting the UK’s tourism industry and spreading the wealth it produces across the country, as we set out in our tourism action plan.

We are providing funding for the performing arts throughout the country. That includes investing £78 million in a new theatre and arts complex, The Factory, which is a home for Manchester International Festival and will encourage international collaboration, investment and visitors, and £5 million in the redevelopment of Colston Hall, the south-west’s major concert venue, to make it fit for the 21st century. Performing arts are being encouraged around the whole country.

Jeremy Corbyn (Islington North) (Lab): I am sure the whole House will join me in expressing our deepest sympathies to the people of Sulawesi in Indonesia following the earthquake and tsunami in which 1,500 people have died. We wish them well in the rebuilding of their communities. I also take this opportunity to thank all those officers and ratings in the Royal Navy who did so much to help during the emergency.

Today is World Mental Health Day, and today there are 5,000 fewer mental health nurses than there were in 2010. The Prime Minister said last week that austerity “is over”. When will austerity be over for mental health services?

The Prime Minister: First, I join the right hon. Gentleman in expressing our condolences to those who were affected by what happened in Indonesia; our thoughts are with them. I am pleased to say that the Department for International Development was able to respond to that, and I understand that the Disasters Emergency Committee appeal is now up to £10 million. As the right hon. Gentleman said, we were able to provide support in kind through the support that was available from our armed forces and, indeed, others. I commend all those who have been working so hard in that area.

The right hon. Gentleman raised the issue of mental health, and I am pleased he did, because this is a Government that are ensuring that mental health is given the attention that it needs. It is this Government who have ensured that there will be parity of esteem for mental health and physical health in the national health service, and it is this Government that are putting record levels of funding into mental health.

If the right hon. Gentleman is asking me, “Do we still need to do more on mental health?” I would say yes, we do. That is exactly why we are setting out further steps today, particularly to improve the mental health of children and young people. I am also very pleased that the Under-Secretary of State for Health and Social Care, my hon. Friend the Member for Thurrock (Jackie Doyle-Price), is taking on responsibility as the Minister for suicide prevention—the first time that a Government has appointed a Minister to such a post. This Government take mental health seriously. That is why we are putting record levels of funding into mental health.

Jeremy Corbyn: It was a Labour amendment to the Health and Social Care Act 2012 that put parity of esteem on the face of the legislation. It was opposed by the right hon. Lady’s Government. If she thinks that mental health spending is going well, maybe she should have told the Health Secretary that, because this morning he said that it is “still way off where we need to be”.

The Royal College of Psychiatrists has found that the income of mental health trusts in England is lower than it was six years ago, and children are being sent as much as 300 miles away for urgent treatment. This needs urgent action now.

People in every village, town and city know that violent crime is rising. Some 21,000 police officers have been cut, and 7,000 police community support officers have gone. When will austerity be over for the police?

The Prime Minister: I have just said that I think there is more for us to do on mental health, and as part of our long-term plan for the national health service we will be doing more for mental health. I remind the right hon.
Gentleman that our plans for the national health service will see £394 million more a week going into our national health service.

The right hon. Gentleman then asked me about policing. Of course, this Government have made £460 million more available for policing in this current year, including the precept on council tax. If he is so concerned about funding for policing, why did the Labour party oppose that extra money?

Jeremy Corbyn: If austerity is over for the police, the Prime Minister does not seem to have told the Police Federation, because it is currently taking the Government to court for failing to implement the decision of the independent pay review body. Our dedicated police officers and police community support officers deserve better than they get from this Government.

In the last year the Education Secretary has been rebuked four times by the statistics watchdog for making false claims about education funding. I know that the Prime Minister is a stickler for accuracy so, given her commitment to ending austerity, can she confirm that austerity is now over for all teachers, who will receive the independently recommended 3.5% pay rise?

The Prime Minister: The right hon. Gentleman talks about the police pay award. It represents the highest consolidated pay award since 2010. He then went on to talk about funding for schools. He knows the announcement that has been made in relation to the teachers’ pay award, but I remind him that school funding this year is at a record high. With the extra £1.3 billion that we have put in this year and next, per pupil funding is being protected in real terms. I recognise the pressures that schools are under, but I also recognise that 1.9 million more children are now in good and outstanding schools, compared with 2010, and part of that is the result of the reforms we have made to education, including free schools and academies which the Labour party would abolish.

Jeremy Corbyn: The reality is that over half of teachers are getting another real-terms pay cut next year. They have been subject to eight years of pay freezes, with pay rises capped below inflation. It is no wonder that there is a chronic shortage of teachers and the Government have failed to hit their recruitment target.

The Conservative leader of Northamptonshire County Council said that it “couldn’t cope with the levels of cuts”.

The Conservative leader of Somerset County Council said:

“I feel abandoned... there are no solutions coming.”

Will the Prime Minister listen to her own council leaders and end austerity, as she promised to do last week?

The Prime Minister: In fact, there are more teachers in our schools now, and we see more people applying to be teachers. I recognise the very hard work that our teachers put in day in, day out. The good results that our children are getting are the result of their hard work and that of their teachers.

The right hon. Gentleman refers to Northamptonshire County Council. Of course, the independent inspection was clear that failures at the council were not due to a lack of funding. We have backed councils in England: between 2015 and 2020, £200 billion are available to deliver the local services that their communities want. We will see an increase of £1.3 billion in the money available to councils over the next two years, extra money for social care was announced at our party conference—councils have access to over £9.6 billion of dedicated funding in relation to that—and there is a £31 million increase for rural services. Yes, we have had to make tough decisions, and yes, councils have been asked to make tough decisions. The reason we had to do that was the state of the public finances and the economy that we were left by the Labour Government. People have made sacrifices and they need to know that their hard work has paid off. Yes, better times are ahead, under a Conservative Government.

Jeremy Corbyn: It might be a good idea if the Prime Minister took a few minutes out of her very busy day to listen to some teachers and hear about the stress they are going through and the number of newly qualified teachers who feel that they cannot carry on anymore and leave the profession that they love.

The National Audit Office has found that local government funding from central Government has been cut by 49% since 2010, and next year Government funding for councils is going to be cut by a further £1.3 billion. The Institute for Fiscal Studies has said that 75% of the social security cuts announced in 2015 have yet to come into effect; £2.7 billion will be cut from working-age benefits next year alone. Can the Prime Minister confirm that this swingeing austerity on the lowest-paid and the disabled people in our society will now end, as she said last week?

The Prime Minister: What we see in the changes that we are putting forward in relation to welfare reform is encouraging people into work and making sure that when they get into work, work pays. I might also say to the right hon. Gentleman that there are £2.4 billion of unclaimed benefits under the legacy system of the Labour party that will be paid to people under universal credit—700,000 people getting the benefits that they are entitled to under universal credit for the future. He asks me about what this Government are doing in relation to the end of austerity, and I have been very clear that there are better times ahead for people. We will see debt falling and we will see support for our public services going up. Austerity is being brought to an end. What is not being brought to an end is fiscal responsibility.

Jeremy Corbyn: The poorest third of households will lose £745 a year if these cuts go ahead. Just this week, the Equality and Human Rights Commission—and the Prime Minister should listen to it—has reported that the situation facing those with disabilities has got worse and their rights are being violated in our society. After eight years of painful austerity, poverty is up, homelessness and deaths on our streets are up, living standards down, public services slashed, and 1 million elderly are not getting the care that they need. Wages have been eroded, and all the while, billions were found for tax giveaways for big corporations and the super-rich. The Prime Minister declared that she is ending austerity, but unless the Budget halts the cuts, increases funding to public
services and gives our public servants a decent pay rise, then is not the claim that austerity is over simply a great big Conservative con?

**The Prime Minister:** Actually, wages are going up; we have increased the national living wage as well; there are 1 million fewer people in absolute poverty under this Government; and under universal credit, 1 million disabled households will get around £110 a month more as a result. The right hon. Gentleman talks about cuts. I will tell him about some cuts that have been of benefit to working people in this country. What about the £18.5 billion of income tax cuts that have helped household incomes under this Government? What about the cuts in their household bills that 11 million households will see as a result of our energy price cap? And what about the £46 billion of cuts through freezing fuel duty, which has increased the national living wage as well; there are 1 million fewer people in absolute poverty under this Government? And what about the £18.5 billion of income tax cuts that have helped household incomes under this Government? What about the cuts in their household bills that 11 million households will see as a result of our energy price cap? And what about the £46 billion of cuts through freezing fuel duty, which has had a real difference to people’s lives? But we know what would really hurt working people. Labour’s plans would cost £1 trillion—£1,000 billion of people’s money. Uncontrolled borrowing, spiralling taxes, working people paying the price of Labour—yet again, Labour taking us back to square one.

Several hon. Members rose—

Mr Speaker: As always, I am determined to find plenty of time for Back Benchers.

Q6. [906975] Stephen Hammond (Wimbledon) (Con): I know that my right hon. Friend recognises how important it is for every child to have the opportunity of the best start in life. For the past three years, I have been campaigning to ensure that summer-born and premature children have that opportunity. The Department for Education’s recent report contains some statistical oddsities and progress seems to have stalled. Would my right hon. Friend agree to meet me and parents to discuss this matter?

**The Prime Minister:** I thank my hon. Friend for raising what is an important issue for many parents. We are concerned that some summer-born and prematurely born children whose parents choose to delay their entry to school until compulsory school age may be missing essential teaching in a reception year. I understand that the Department for Education is looking at how best to make changes without creating unintended consequences elsewhere in the system. It is important that it looks at it in that sense. The Minister from the Department will be very happy to meet my hon. Friend to discuss this issue.

Ian Blackford: (Ross, Skye and Lochaber) (SNP): As you well know, Mr Speaker, today is World Mental Health Day. I want to congratulate the Prime Minister on her appointment of a Minister for suicide prevention. In Scotland, we have our own Minister for Mental Health and look forward to working closely with the new UK Minister on this important issue. Does the Prime Minister agree with me that we must all work to eradicate policies and circumstances that lead people to believe that suicide is their only option?

**The Prime Minister:** It is right that we take the issue of suicide as seriously as we have done—in particular, the concerns raised about the number of young men who commit suicide. People in a range of different circumstances find themselves in a position where they think about committing suicide. We must do everything we can to ensure that people are prevented from committing suicide and that support is given to people in those circumstances.

Ian Blackford: I am glad the Prime Minister agrees with me, because, as reported by The Independent, nearly one in every two women taking part in the UK Government’s work capability assessment say they have attempted suicide after or during the process. A series of secret internal inquiries reveal that Conservative Ministers were repeatedly warned of the policy’s shortcomings. Will the Prime Minister commit today to ensuring that her new Minister for Suicide Prevention looks at the impact of her Government’s own social security policies and at long last scraps the appalling work capability assessment?

**The Prime Minister:** First, the assessments were introduced by a previous Government. It is important that we get the assessments right. It is right that we are encouraging people into the workplace and wanting to ensure that people who are able to be in the workplace are given the support that enables them to do that. That is what we want to do. It is right that we maintain assessments. Of course we look at the impact and quality of those assessments. That is work the Department for Work and Pensions does on a regular basis. It is important that we are undertaking those assessments.

Q10. [906979] Kevin Hollinrake (Thirsk and Malton) (Con): Former Prime Minister Gordon Brown and head of the Financial Conduct Authority Andrew Bailey have joined the call by the all-party group on fair business banking for action against the bankers who cost the UK taxpayers trillions of pounds throughout the financial crisis, none of whom have been fined, banned or prosecuted, despite clear evidence of guilt of fraud and malpractice. Will my right hon. Friend do all she can to urge and enable regulators and crime agencies to hold those responsible to account?

**The Prime Minister:** I can give my hon. Friend the assurance that, since the financial crisis, we have been looking at the design of the regulatory system to ensure that we have built one of the most robust regulatory systems in the world. It is designed specifically to ensure financial stability and protect taxpayers.

We have introduced a number of measures relating to the responsibility of those at the top of organisations. In 2016, we brought into force the senior managers and certification regime to hold those the top personally responsible for wrongdoing. Legislation was introduced alongside that regime that ensures that bosses whose reckless misconduct causes their institution to fail face up to seven years in prison. Although these reforms are of course very recent and it will take further time before we see the full impact of them, the FCA issued total fines of £229 million last year against individuals and firms who have broken the FCA’s rules. I can reassure my hon. Friend that we will remain focused on ensuring that we build a fairer and more balanced banking system and, if there is more that needs to be done, on looking at what we should be doing.
Q2. [906971] Caroline Flint (Don Valley) (Lab): Does the Prime Minister agree with her Work and Pensions Secretary that half of lone parents and around two thirds of working-age couples with children should lose the equivalent of £2,400 a year under universal credit? For us to believe the Prime Minister’s promise to end austerity, will she promise today to reverse the £3 billion of cuts that are built into the universal credit roll-out?

The Prime Minister: In relation to those people who are being moved on to universal credit as part of managed migration, we are of course undertaking that. It will start later next year and will be done initially on a small-scale basis to ensure that we get that right. We are putting in transitional protections for those people so that people who are moved on to universal credit as part of the process will not see any reduction—they will be protected.

Q11. [906980] Peter Aldous (Waveney) (Con): Last week, Access Community Trust, working in conjunction with other Lowestoft voluntary groups and Waveney District Council, launched the thin ice project, which will provide emergency accommodation for the homeless not just during the period of below zero night-time temperatures but for the whole winter period from 1 November to 28 February. On World Homeless Day, will the Prime Minister build on the rough-sleeping strategy and provide a long-term funding system so that charities such as Access Community Trust and St Mungo’s can put in place bespoke initiatives that prevent homelessness before anyone actually has to sleep rough?

The Prime Minister: My hon. Friend is absolutely right to raise this issue, because we do not want to see anybody having to sleep on the streets. That is why we have committed to ensuring that we eradicate and end rough sleeping by 2027 and halve it by 2022. That is why we are supporting various projects across the country to do that. I recognise his point about local authorities, their need to build capacity and capability in their teams to ensure that they can deal with this and the role that the voluntary sector can play, too. We are investing more than £3 million a year with voluntary sector groups to train and advise local authority teams so that they are able to address these issues. We want to ensure that rough sleeping becomes a thing of the past.

Q3. [906972] Mr Alistair Carmichael (Orkney and Shetland) (LD): Members of the Scottish Fishermen’s Association and the National Federation of Fishermen’s Organisations are jointly lobbying Parliament today. They ask for a very simple undertaking from the Prime Minister—namely, that in negotiating the Brexit deal she will not trade away their right to fish in UK waters. Will the Prime Minister give our fishermen that undertaking?

The Prime Minister: Absolutely, I can give my hon. Friend that assurance. Obviously, the long-term plan for the national health service is being developed by the national health service in conjunction with clinicians and people at a local level. It is absolutely clear that we need to ensure that we recognise the importance of those community services. As my hon. Friend says, it is this Government who are not only putting in place a long-term plan to support the national health service but also that longer-term funding, which will see the biggest cash boost ever in the history of the national health service.

Q4. [906973] Jim McMahon (Oldham West and Royton) (Lab/Co-op): Modern slavery is a scourge on our society, affecting thousands of victims, including Ján, who lived in an attic in Oldham and was forced to work without pay by his gangmasters for six years. Will the Prime Minister join me in congratulating businesses such as the Co-operative Group on their work, which includes offering paid work placements to help victims to rebuild their lives? Can she explain why it has taken the Government five months to get around to recruiting the anti-slavery commissioner?

The Prime Minister: As I think the hon. Gentleman will know, modern slavery is an issue that I have taken a particular interest in and worked on. I am proud of the impact that our Modern Slavery Act 2015 is having, but, sadly, we continue to see people being effectively enslaved in this country. We are seeing more cases in which criminals are prosecuted, but we need to ensure that support is available. I certainly commend the Co-op, which he referenced, and other businesses that are working to help people who have been victims of modern slavery. My right hon. Friend the International Development Secretary tells me that when she chaired a session on modern slavery at the UN General Assembly, the role of the private sector was given particular prominence. We will continue to do all we can to ensure that we are dealing with modern slavery.

Mr Kenneth Clarke (Rushcliffe) (Con): It is obvious that the biggest task facing the Prime Minister this winter is, first, to obtain a compromise agreement with the other 27 European Governments on the terms of our withdrawal, and then to win the approval of a majority in this House for that same agreement, or something like it, in a meaningful vote on the terms of our departure. Does she equally accept that the maths makes it obvious that that majority can only be obtained if the agreement retains the support of the pro-European Conservative Back Benchers in this House and wins the support of a significant number of Labour pro-European
Back Benchers? That would reveal that the hard-line Eurosceptic views of the Bennites on the Labour Front Bench and the right-wing nationalists in our party are a minority in this Parliament. Will she therefore proceed courageously on that basis in the formidable task that lies ahead of her?

**The Prime Minister:** We are working to ensure that we get a good agreement for the United Kingdom—an agreement that delivers on the vote that the people took in the referendum to leave the European Union, to bring an end to the jurisdiction of the European Court, to bring an end to free movement and to bring an end to sending vast sums of money every year to the European Union and that does it in a way that protects jobs and ensures that there is no hard border between Northern Ireland and Ireland. We are working for that deal, and when we come back with a deal, I would hope that everybody across the whole House will put the national interest first and not only look at a good deal for the future of the United Kingdom, but remember that having given the decision on whether we stay in the European Union to the British people, and the British people having voted to leave, it is our duty to ensure that we leave.

**Q7. [906976] Peter Grant (Glenrothes) (SNP):** Yesterday, we marked the start of Baby Loss Awareness Week. Oliver Gill was 24 weeks old when he lost his life to cancer on Christmas day 2010. Since then, his parents Andy and Jennifer have, through the charity LoveOliver, raised well in excess of half a million pounds to fund research into childhood cancers and provide much-needed emotional and practical support for families affected by those terrible illnesses. The Prime Minister will know, having met them in 2016, what a remarkable couple they are. Will she join me today in thanking them for all that they have done and continue to do?

**The Prime Minister:** It is very good of the hon. Gentleman to raise that issue. I pay tribute to other Members across the House who have put clear emphasis on this issue and ensured that, in Baby Loss Awareness Week and outside it, we recognise the tragedies that sadly take place and the circumstances that are faced by too many families in this country. I am very happy to pay tribute to the hon. Gentleman’s constituents and the amazing work that they have done in raising the funds that he has referred to. We do not want anybody to have to face and deal with this, but out of such a terrible tragedy has come the good of that fundraising, which can help others. I hope that his constituents are proud of what they have done.

**James Heappey (Wells) (Con):** In Somerset, we have been working for years to pay down the huge debts left by the Lib Dems when they last ran county hall, which means that funding for many essential services is now being withdrawn. Will the Prime Minister meet me and Somerset colleagues to discuss this challenge and will she look favourably on our bid to fully retain business rates from April 2019?

**The Prime Minister:** I understand that the issue of business rates and the bids to which my hon. Friend has referred, from Somerset and others, are currently being assessed. A decision will be announced alongside the local government finance settlement later this year. I can tell my hon. Friend that I have already received representations from a Somerset Member of Parliament on the issue, but I am a Somerset Minister in the Ministry of Housing, Communities and Local Government will be willing to meet him and others to discuss it further. I am sure that they will be happy to sit down and discuss the details.

**Q8. [906977] Mr Ronnie Campbell (Blyth Valley) (Lab):** In 2010, after the crisis of the banks, the national debt stood at £768 billion. Now that the Tories have been in for 10 years, albeit five of them with the wishy-washy Liberals, can the Prime Minister tell the House how much the debt is today?

**The Prime Minister:** The hon. Gentleman has raised the issue of debt, and it is an important issue to raise. What the Government are doing is seeing that we will actually—[Interruption.] The hon. Gentleman does not need to ask me the question if he has the figure already. What the Government are doing is ensuring that debt is going to fall, and, crucially, we have seen a reduction in our deficit of three quarters under this Conservative Government. The hon. Gentleman should not look quite so pleased with himself when he starts to think about what a Labour Government would do to our debt in the future, which is take us back.

**James Gray (North Wiltshire) (Con):** The 120 soldiers who will march through the north door of Westminster Hall straight after PMQs are actually representing the 3,000 who are currently deployed in 28 countries around the world. I am delighted that the Prime Minister—and, I hope, colleagues from across the House as well as staff from the Palace—will be there to welcome them and thank them for all that they do. Can we at that time remember these people—First, the families without whose support their deployment would not be possible; secondly, those who are returning from overseas, injured both mentally and physically; and thirdly, those comrades who will never return?

**The Prime Minister:** My hon. Friend puts his point extremely well. Of course we are proud of everything that our servicemen and women do, and I, and other Members, will be pleased to welcome those servicemen and women and give thanks to them in the way that we can here in the House. However, my hon. Friend is absolutely right: we should never forget the families of those servicemen and women, and we should ensure that we support them. We should also recognise the importance of supporting those who return with injuries—some, of course, physical, and some mental—and of ensuring that we recognise both physical and mental injuries. We should never forget those who have laid down their lives for our freedom and security.

**Q9. [906978] Anna McMorrin (Cardiff North) (Lab):** I am sure that the whole House will have been horrified at the sight of mothers feeding their chicks to death with plastic because of the tons of waste that we pump into our oceans every day. We must take urgent action, but our waste system is broken. Will the Prime Minister commit herself today to working with me to stop this tide?
The Prime Minister: The hon. Lady has raised a very important issue. As she will know, the question of plastics is one that the Government are taking extremely seriously. Our 25-year environment plan includes a pledge to eliminate all avoidable plastic waste such as microbeads and straws. There are shortcomings in the current regulations relating to plastic recycling and how we incentivise better packaging designs and material choices. We will consult on our proposals later in the year, and we will of course consider any ideas from Members about how we can ensure that we are dealing with the scourge of plastic.

Several hon. Members rose—

Mr Speaker: The hon. Member for Taunton Deane (Rebecca Pow) has just won an award for her commendable work on speech and language services, so she should be a celebrated denizen of the House. I call Rebecca Pow.

Rebecca Pow (Taunton Deane) (Con): Thank you so much, Mr Speaker; I will save a question about that for later.

As the Prime Minister will know, the Agriculture Bill comes to the Chamber today, and it presents a great opportunity to rethink our land use policy and everything about the way we run our land. Does the Prime Minister agree that it demonstrates that this Government are leading the way in supporting a sustainable biodiversity environment and supporting our farmers and food producers and our rural communities—especially those in Taunton Deane?

The Prime Minister: I congratulate my hon. Friend and commend her on all the work she does on issues relating to the environment. She is absolutely right: leaving the European Union and the common agricultural policy enables us to take another look at our support for farmers and their use of the land, and as we do that to address issues such as the impact on the environment. It means we are able to ensure not only that we see the sustainable environment and biodiversity to which my hon. Friend refers, but that we are a generation that leaves the planet in a better state than we found it.

Q13. [906982] Kelvin Hopkins (Luton North) (Ind): We have heard this week that the world is facing ecological and human disaster from climate change and that radical transport reforms are vital for our future. Will the Prime Minister give her personal support to the proposed GB Freight Route rail scheme, which would take some 5 million lorry journeys off our roads each year, cutting thousands of tonnes of CO₂ and other emissions that are contributing to global warming and poisoning the air we breathe?

The Prime Minister: The hon. Gentleman makes an important point about the need for us to ensure that we get freight off our roads and on to the railways. There are real benefits in doing that, both for the environment and in relation to congestion, and we are investing more money in the strategic freight network. I will have to look into the specific proposal the hon. Gentleman has raised, but I can assure him that the principle of ensuring we are encouraging freight on to our railways and off our roads is a good one.

Alex Burghart (Brentwood and Ongar) (Con): The House will have heard the Japanese Prime Minister say that Britain would be welcomed into the trans-Pacific partnership with open arms. Does the Prime Minister agree that post-Brexit it would be wonderful if our country could meet Japan’s embrace?

The Prime Minister: Obviously I have spoken to the Japanese Prime Minister about this issue, as I have spoken to other Prime Ministers of countries involved in the comprehensive and progressive agreement for trans-Pacific partnership. I am very pleased that they want to welcome us into that trade agreement with open arms, and we stand ready to do exactly that.

Q14. [906983] Ms Karen Buck (Westminster North) (Lab): Last week, a judge was unable to make a secure accommodation order for a young man involved in gangs who has psychiatric problems and is at serious risk of harm. The judge said that “an opportunity to help him and keep him safe” was being lost, and added: “Like many colleagues I am dismayed, frustrated and outraged, and deeply worried that we will have blood on our hands.” On World Mental Health Day, will the Prime Minister guarantee that she will investigate this case and make sure action is taken and also guarantee that no other vulnerable children will be left in such a terrible situation in future?

The Prime Minister: I am sure that we are all concerned about the particular case the hon. Lady raises. My right hon. Friend the Secretary of State for Health will be happy to meet her to discuss it and look at the issues it raises. We want to ensure that support is available for vulnerable people, particularly vulnerable young people.

Richard Graham (Gloucester) (Con): The effect of the recent tsunami, earthquake and volcano at Palu in Indonesia’s Sulawesi islands has been devastating, and the welcome response from our embassy and Department for International Development includes two RAF A400M aircraft and supplies, as well as a team of humanitarian workers who are out there now. “Teman yang membantu saat dibutuhkan adalah teman sebenarnya”: a friend in need is a friend indeed. Will my right hon. Friend join me in sending our condolences to President Jokowi, and our thanks to British citizens and JCB for their help, and will she encourage DFID to do even more, including extending the matching of funding from the Disasters Emergency Committee Indonesia tsunami appeal?

The Prime Minister: My hon. Friend raises again the important issue that was referred to by the Leader of the Opposition earlier. Of course our condolences go to all those who have lost loved ones in the terrible disaster that has taken place, and to those who have been affected by it in whatever way. We commend all those who have been working there to bring support, aid and help to those who are affected, and we recognise the significant contribution that has been made by British volunteers and companies and by our armed forces. The Department for International Development has already made some commitments in relation to match-funding the money that the Disasters Emergency Committee is raising, but it will of course continue to look at what support it can give.
Q15. [906984]Emma Dent Coad (Kensington) (Lab): Will the Prime Minister please update the House on the progress being made to appoint independent panel members—as agreed with, among others, the Muslim Council of Britain—for the inquiry on Islamophobia in the Conservative party?

The Prime Minister: I can say to the hon. Lady that issues relating to any particular concerns or allegations that have been raised in the Conservative party are properly investigated and considered through the new code of conduct that we have introduced. Every complaint that has been made is being or has been investigated, and appropriate action has been taken, including in some cases suspending and expelling members. We are also taking further steps. We are working in conjunction with TellMAMA, making diversity training more widely available and improving how local associations deal with complaints. There should be no place in this country for discrimination, and it is right that as a political party we are working to ensure that we take action when any complaints are made about those within our party.

Heidi Allen (South Cambridgeshire) (Con): In March, colleagues and I met the Prime Minister to discuss sleep-in shifts, and I thank her very much for her focus. I appreciate that Ministers are still in discussions since the Court of Appeal ruled not to uphold the Unison case, but in the absence of clarity, some local authorities are now reverting to paying a single through-the-night rate, whereas we have rightly said that people should be paid the national minimum wage. Will the Prime Minister and her Ministers tackle this as urgently as possible? Also, I am not sure that Her Majesty’s Revenue and Customs is interpreting the Court of Appeal’s ruling either.

The Prime Minister: My hon. Friend raises an important issue, which she and others have raised on a number of occasions in the House. The Secretary of State for Health and Social Care is looking urgently at the issue, but as I understand it, a case relating to this matter is going to the Supreme Court, and we will of course have to consider any outcome of those court proceedings.

Chris Bryant (Rhondda) (Lab): In a few minutes’ time, 57 Members of all political parties will be launching an important new report on acquired brain injury. This is a hidden epidemic that affects more than 1.3 million people in our country. On average, every primary school class in this country will have at least one child who has a brain injury, and they are sometimes unaware of this.

The good news is that if we get good rehabilitation to every single person affected, we can save the NHS £5 billion a year. Will the Prime Minister meet with me and others involved in the group? And I do mean her: I understand that she often wants other Ministers to meet people on her behalf, and that she is very busy, but this affects our prisons, our schools, our armed forces and the whole of Government. We can save lives, and give people a better quality of life, but we can only do it if we join up the dots.

The Prime Minister: The hon. Gentleman speaks with passion about this issue, and rightly so. It is an important issue, and I will ensure that he is able to bring that information appropriately to Ministers. He makes a point that covers not only this issue but other issues in Government too. The Chancellor of the Duchy of Lancaster and Minister for the Cabinet Office, my right hon. Friend the Member for Aylesbury (Mr Lidington), is working to ensure that on issues such as this we see joined-up working between Government Departments to ensure that the right action is being taken. [Interruption.]

Mr Speaker: The hon. Member for Rhondda (Chris Bryant) is chuntering from a sedentary position, “Meet with you.” It seems to be his preferred mantra of the day, and doubtless it will now be recorded in the Official Report.

Charlie Elphicke (Dover) (Ind): Does the Prime Minister share my concern that drugs-related deaths in Kent have doubled in the past three years and that the rise in county lines operations means that there are now 48 separate gang operations there? Does she agree that it is important for the Home Office to put more priority on ensuring that we win the war on drugs?

The Prime Minister: My hon. Friend raises an important issue. I understand that a new co-ordination centre is being set up to ensure that the work on county lines that the National Crime Agency has been leading is properly integrated with the work of the forces involved. I am pleased to say that we saw a recent case in Birmingham in which an individual was sentenced to 14 years for having effectively enslaved three children to sell drugs for them as part of this county lines approach after having pleaded guilty to charges of modern slavery. We recognise that the problem is growing, and the Home Office is taking action.

James Frith (Bury North) (Lab): Nearly 70% of all children excluded from school have special educational needs or a disability, and the reason cited for the exclusion of a fifth of all excluded children is “other”—a category for which no further information is held. Does the Prime Minister agree that this unfolding national crisis is totally unacceptable? Will she commit to stopping the use of that category, which encourages off-rolling in our schools? Will she press Ofsted to ensure that its new framework supports and encourages inclusive schools and an education for all our children?

The Prime Minister: We want to ensure that every child is in the right school setting for them. For many children with special educational needs that will mean a mainstream school, but for others that will be in a special school. I recognise the hon. Gentleman’s point about exclusion, about which we do have concerns. That is why a review of exclusions is being undertaken by my former colleague the previous Member for Crewe and Nantwich, who took a particular interest in this area as Children’s Minister, and we will look carefully at the results of the review.
Points of Order

12.51 pm

Tracy Brabin (Batley and Spen) (Lab/Co-op): On a point of order, Mr Speaker. In answer to a question about school funding, the Prime Minister repeated the statistic about 1.9 million children being in good or outstanding schools that was proven not necessarily the full truth only this week following investigation by the shadow Secretary of State for Education. The UK Statistics Authority has also proven the number not to be true. Will you advise, Mr Speaker?

Mr Speaker: I am grateful to the hon. Lady for her perspicacity and her fleetness of foot in raising this matter immediately after Prime Minister’s questions. As the House will know, I have many roles here, but they do not include that of “truth commissioner”. Each Member is responsible for the accuracy of what he or she says in the House, and if a Member, including a Minister, thinks that he or she has erred, it is that Member’s responsibility to correct the record. Meanwhile, the hon. Lady has put her thoughts on record, and she will have to content herself with that for now.

Mr Peter Bone (Wellingborough) (Con) rose—

Mr Speaker: The day would not be complete without a point of order from Mr Peter Bone.

Mr Bone: On a point of order, Mr Speaker. Unusually in Prime Minister’s questions—or at any time in the House—a hon. Member held up a placard with a slogan on it. What was coincidental is that I understand that a photographer, to whom I am sure you had given permission, was taking photographs from the Gallery above me. I wonder whether you would investigate that coincidence, Mr Speaker.

Mr Speaker: That is a coincidence. The House photographer was working in the Gallery, but I did not note of what the House photographer took pictures. More particularly, as the hon. Gentleman has raised a perfectly proper point, the Chair has to judge in the circumstances of the time whether it is best to intervene or simply to allow matters to proceed. I felt that the hon. Member for Blyth Valley (Mr Campbell) might have, as it were, luxuriated in the lather of further attention if I had commented on the matter, but he was behaving in a mildly disorderly manner. As he knows, I am a little concerned that his propensity to consume very hot curry might be encouraging him in this somewhat untoward behaviour, from which I hope he might desist when he gets a bit older—he is only a young, new Member.

We will leave it there for now, but I am sure that the hon. Member for Wellingborough (Mr Bone), who regards his colleagues and those who work in the service of the House highly, would not cast aspersions on the integrity of a House Officer and, as it happens, a superb photographer—[Interruption.] Oh Mr Campbell, you must compose yourself; we are at an early stage in our proceedings.

BILL PRESENTED

RAILWAYS (FRANCHISES) BILL

Presentation and First Reading (Standing Order No. 57)

Tim Farron, supported by Sir Edward Davey and Tom Brake, presented a Bill to require the Secretary of State to terminate a rail passenger services franchise agreement in certain circumstances; to repeal section 25 of the Railways Act 1993; to make provision for local franchising authorities in England; and for connected purposes.

Bill read the First time; to be read a Second time on Friday 23 November, and to be printed (Bill 271).
Criminal Records (Childhood Offences)

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

12.55 pm

Theresa Villiers (Chipping Barnet) (Con): I beg to move,

That leave be given to bring in a Bill to make provision about the criminal records of persons aged under 18 on the day an offence was committed; and for connected purposes.

I am bringing forward this Bill to highlight the need for reform of the rules in England and Wales on the disclosure of offences committed in childhood. I became involved in the issue after being approached separately by two of my constituents. Minor incidents during their teenage years, one leading to a caution and another to a police warning, were showing up on their Disclosure and Barring Service checks and causing risk-averse employers to turn them down for work in healthcare and schools.

We have one of the most punitive approaches in the world to childhood criminal records, and the case for change is strong. Support for reform has come from many quarters, including the Select Committee on Justice, the Ministry of Justice’s Charlie Taylor review, the Law Commission, and a number of charities and campaigning organisations. The system has been extensively litigated on several occasions and was ruled to be unlawful by the Court of Appeal, and a Supreme Court judgment is imminent. Whether the Government win their case or not, the current approach is not working, and change is needed.

Convictions can potentially become spent, meaning that they no longer have to be declared to employers and do not appear on basic criminal records checks, but rehabilitation periods can be lengthy and some types of conviction can never become spent. Even spent convictions and cautions continue to appear on standard and enhanced DBS checks, which are accessible to an expanding list of employers and organisations, including the care sector, the NHS, schools and financial regulators. Some cautions and convictions can be filtered from a standard and enhanced check, meaning that they no longer appear, but the filtering system is limited. If a person has committed two offences, no matter how minor, they will not be filtered, and there is a long list of offences that can never be filtered. In one of the cases considered in the recent Supreme Court litigation, a boy hit a school bully and was charged with actual bodily harm. ABH is an offence that cannot be filtered, so that will appear on his DBS record for life.

A key problem is that we have no distinct criminal records system for children. Apart from some limited differences providing for slightly shorter rehabilitation periods and other timeframes, children are subject to the full rigours of the disclosure system that I have outlined. Records relating to under-18 offences are retained for life. I believe that the childhood criminal records system in England and Wales is anchoring children to their past and preventing them from moving on from their mistakes. It is acting as a barrier to employment, education and housing. It is therefore working against rehabilitation, undermining a core purpose of the youth justice system. The current rules also perpetuate inequality. The Government’s race disparity audit concluded that children from a black and minority ethnic background are sadly more likely to end up with a criminal record. A system that is unduly penal in its treatment of such records has a harder and more disproportionate effect on BME communities. Similar points can be made about children who have spent time in care.

A report by the Standing Committee for Youth Justice examined the treatment of childhood criminal records in 16 comparable jurisdictions. Ours was the most punitive of all those examined, including every one of the US states considered in the report. Children in England and Wales are more likely to receive a criminal record and, according to the charity Unlock, the effect of that record is more profound and lasts longer than anywhere else in Europe. We need a fairer, more proportionate and flexible system that protects the public without unduly harming people’s opportunity to change and turn their lives around. We need wide-ranging reform, not a piecemeal response to losing a court case.

I acknowledge that children who commit very serious crimes should be excluded from the reforms, but careful consideration should be given to where to draw the line. With that caveat, a new distinct system for childhood criminal records could include the following: first, it could reduce the period before an offence can become spent; secondly, it could restrict the circumstances in which police intelligence relating to events in childhood can be disclosed; thirdly, it could scrap the rule that provides that someone with more than one offence can never have their offences filtered out of a DBS check; and, fourthly, it could reduce the list of offences that are never eligible to be filtered from such a check.

Even some offences that sound serious can result from relatively minor episodes. For instance, a child who pushes over another child in the playground and takes their phone could technically be guilty of robbery. Other reforms that should be considered include the introduction of a discretionary system for filtering those offences that are deemed to be too serious for automatic filtering, with an independent review process. I appreciate the concern about introducing a discretionary, and hence administrative, element to the system, and the cost and time that that could involve, but both Scotland and Northern Ireland include such an element in their legal systems, and it could really help in hard cases when the context in which the offence was committed can show it in a completely different light from how it first appears.

A further reform that has been floated is a provision for the deletion of childhood offences from police computers altogether, if certain conditions are met, perhaps along similar lines to the judicial rehabilitation process that operates in France. I know that that sort of change would give peace of mind to many who feel that their lives have been ruined by their childhood convictions.

I fully accept that those who commit criminal offences in childhood should face prosecution and punishment. If they have the capacity, they must face the consequences of their actions. But, except in cases of really serious criminal offences, I just do not believe that it is fair for people to have their entire lives blighted by the poor judgments and mistakes that they made in childhood. The sad fact is that many of us make bad choices and foolish decisions when we are young. Thankfully, for the vast majority of us that does not result in involvement
with the criminal justice system, but for those children who do end up with convictions, it should not mean a life sentence.

Many people in that situation have the potential to make a big success of their lives and contribute positively to our economy, public services and society, but they are being held back by convictions, cautions or warnings for minor offences committed many years ago when they were completely different people from the adults they have now become, and those offences should have no relevance for the careers that they now wish to pursue. The situation can be a cause of shame, anxiety and distress. People’s past is robbing them of hope for their future. Putting up unnecessary barriers that deter or prevent people from working in sectors such as education, the NHS, social care or the City means that the country is losing out on real talent and energy. I have felt genuinely inspired by what constituents have told me about how they have turned their lives around. They are studying at university or doing an apprenticeship—they are aspiring to a better life.

I am introducing the Bill because I believe that if we are here to do anything in this Chamber, it is to ensure that this country is a place where people have opportunity. We are here to make sure that the constituents we represent have the chance to get on and make a success of their lives—to go as far as their talents and hard work will take them. If we are going to be serious about giving people a chance in life, that should include giving them a second chance. Lord Trimble once said:

“Just because you have a past, doesn’t mean you can’t have a future”.

The reforms that I am advocating would help to remedy a grave injustice in our legal system. I commend the Bill to the House.

Question put and agreed to.

Ordered,

That Theresa Villiers, Victoria Prentis, Sir Bernard Jenkin, Mr Nigel Evans, Mr Iain Duncan Smith, Dr Phillip Lee, Mr David Lammy, David Hanson, Kate Green, Liz Saville Roberts, Jim Shannon and Sir Edward Davey present the Bill.

Theresa Villiers accordingly presented the Bill.

Bill read the First time; to be read a Second time on Friday 26 October, and to be printed (Bill 272).

Agriculture Bill

Second Reading

Mr Speaker: I inform the House that I have selected the amendment in the names of the representatives of the official Opposition.

1.6 pm

The Secretary of State for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs (Michael Gove): I beg to move, That the Bill be now read a Second time.

We are lucky in all four nations of the United Kingdom to have the best farmers in the world producing the best food in the world. This, the first comprehensive agriculture Bill for five decades, will provide those farmers with a new platform to modernise agriculture; to be able to produce, sell and export more food; and, at last, to receive the rewards that they deserve for their environmental work and the other public goods that they provide.

I am grateful for the enormous amount of hard work that has gone into the preparation of the Bill. I am grateful to the civil servants at the Department for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs and I am grateful to those non-governmental organisations that contributed to our consultation paper “Health and Harmony”. Above all, I am grateful to our farmers, who are Britain’s backbone and on whom we are reliant for the food that we enjoy and for the health of our rural economy and society. Every measure in the Bill is designed to ensure that our farmers receive the support that they deserve to give us the healthy food that we enjoy and the beautiful rural environment on which we all depend.

Sir Desmond Swayne (New Forest West) (Con): In the course of his remarks, will my right hon. Friend reassure me that the Bill will be a vehicle for the support of common land, which accounts for 20% of our areas of special scientific interest and nearly 40% of open access, but which is nevertheless the subject of fragile traditional systems?

Michael Gove: My right hon. Friend makes an incredibly important point. Earlier this year, I had the opportunity to meet some farmers who farm common land in the Lake district, and the particular work that they and others who farm common land do, to ensure both that traditional agricultural methods continue and that environmental benefits survive and are enhanced, is critical. We can provide for them with enhanced methods of support.

Caroline Lucas (Brighton, Pavilion) (Green): In April this year, the Secretary of State said that food production is “ultimately about health”, and I agree with him. That being the case, will he explain why he has not listed public health as one of the outcomes in clause 1? Will he think again about putting public health right at the heart of the Bill and his policies?

Michael Gove: It is crucial that we all recognise that food production in this country is critical to the improvement of public health. My Department is working with the Department of Health and Social Care and others to ensure that, not only in this Bill but in other measures that we take, we put the importance of improving
public health at the heart of everything that we do. The hon. Lady will be familiar with the actions that we have already taken on air quality, and she will also know that we are launching a food strategy, the first aspect of which I announced at the Conservative party conference last week: measures to ensure that we deal effectively with food waste and that healthy and nutritious food is provided to those who need it.

Helen Goodman (Bishop Auckland) (Lab): The Secretary of State was just speaking about the commons, and many of the farmers on the commons are sheep farmers. Would he care to say whether the report in The Times that large numbers of sheep will have to be slaughtered in the event of no deal is correct?

Michael Gove: The Times is a great newspaper of record, but I did not recognise today’s report. Sheep do have to be slaughtered eventually to ensure that upland farmers and sheep farmers more broadly can get a fair price for the sheepmeat they produce. Indeed, our Bill has specific provisions to ensure that all farmers get a fair price in the market and that we can intervene where necessary to safeguard their economic interests.

Mr Mark Prisk (Hertford and Stortford) (Con): Will my right hon. Friend give way?

Mr Philip Dunne (Ludlow) (Con): Will my right hon. Friend give way?

Michael Gove: I will give way first to my hon. Friend for Hertford and Stortford (Mr Prisk) and then to my hon. Friend the Member for Ludlow (Mr Dunne).

Mr Prisk: My right hon. Friend the Secretary of State is right to highlight the important role of farmers. I have met many of my local farmers and other quality food producers, and the question they have put to me in recent weeks is how will the new regime enable them to compete against often cheaper and often lower quality imports?

Michael Gove: This Government have emphasised that we will ensure that the high environmental and animal welfare standards of which we are so proud and which our farmers uphold are defended. We will not enter into trade or other agreements that undercut or undermine the high standards on which British agriculture’s reputation depends.

Mr Dunne: My right hon. Friend is being generous in giving way. I congratulate him on his opening remarks. Speaking as a farmer and for the many farmers I represent in my constituency, we are heartened to hear that he is putting farmers front and forward in the Bill. Further to his response to our hon. Friend the Member for Hertford and Stortford (Mr Prisk), will he elaborate on the extent to which food security will be improved by the Bill, to ensure that we protect a viable agricultural sector in this country?

Michael Gove: Food security is vital. Throughout the history of the United Kingdom, food security has depended on both quality domestic production and access to food from other markets. Some 60% of our food, and 75% of the food capable of being grown or reared on our shores, comes from the United Kingdom, but of course we also have access to food from other nations, and it is vital that we continue to do so. The Government’s approach as we leave the European Union is designed to ensure both that we have the best possible access to European markets—I am sure that the House knows that we import more than we export to the EU—but that we take opportunities for our farmers to secure new markets. Critically—I am sure the hon. Member for Bishop Auckland (Helen Goodman) will be interested to hear this—the sheepmeat sector not only has significant exposure to the EU, but benefits from trade deals with the middle east and the far east, where there is a growing market for the high-quality lamb and mutton that we produce in this country. Leaving the EU therefore gives us an opportunity not just to maintain our existing trading links, but to expand them.

Geraint Davies (Swansea West) (Lab/Co-op): Does the Secretary of State not accept that, as we approach Brexit, there are concerns about food shortages and barriers to trade and to imports that may be followed by an open market situation where agriculturalists and farmers are subjected to low-price competition and perhaps questions about quality? Those investing in agriculture will face both demands for greater production and intense competition, and will that not create real problems for the industry?

Michael Gove: I absolutely take on board the hon. Gentleman’s points, but we have some of the most productive, commercially successful and progressive farmers in this country ready to take advantage of both new markets and increasing demand among UK consumers and UK producers for high-quality UK produce. Supermarkets are often criticised in this House, but I think it is notable that UK supermarkets, from the Co-op to Waitrose, are increasingly responding to the demand from UK consumers for UK-sourced produce.

Mr Ranil Jayawardena (North East Hampshire) (Con): Is it not true that the high standards we have in this country and some of the niche products we produce are what make our exports so attractive, so the Bill, by creating a greener agricultural system and rewarding farmers for doing the right thing in managing our environment for the long run, is good not only for our economy, our environment and our people, but for trade?

Michael Gove: My hon. Friend makes the case brilliantly. Members of the House will be familiar with the work of the Soil Association, which under its current leader, Helen Browning, manages to secure export markets for high-quality British pigmeat in Germany and beyond on the basis of doing precisely what my hon. Friend describes: meeting demand for high-quality organic produce and trading on the basis of the United Kingdom’s reputation for high environmental standards.

Several hon. Members rose—

Michael Gove: I am happy to give way to my hon. Friend the Member for Brecon and Radnorshire (Chris Davies), then my right hon. Friend the Members for...
East Devon (Sir Hugo Swire) and for Wokingham (John Redwood), and then my hon. Friend the Member for Totnes (Dr Wollaston).

Mr Speaker: Order. The approach the Secretary of State is taking is most engaging, but it is not necessary for him to conduct an orchestra in proceeding with the debate, nor is it necessary to give a precise chronological guide to his intended order of taking interventions. Nevertheless, it is a notable eccentricity, which the House might enjoy. I call Sir Hugo Swire.

Sir Hugo Swire (East Devon) (Con): I am most grateful to you, Mr Speaker, as I think you have just given me an earlier slot than my right hon. Friend. Friend was indicating so effortlessly, like Herbert von Karajan.

My right hon. Friend just talked about supermarkets’ desire to stock more British and locally sourced products, which if true is manifestly a good thing. Will he commit to conducting a root and branch overhaul of food labelling and the country of origin system, which is currently misleading and has often been abused? The British consumer deserves to know where food is produced and where it is packaged and not to be misled by labelling.

Michael Gove: My right hon. Friend makes a good point. Traceability and knowing the provenance of our food are vital. Outside the European Union, we can reform our food labelling system so that we have greater honesty about where our food comes from. He gives me an opportunity to say also that, as the Under-Secretary of State for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs, my hon. Friend the Member for Macclesfield (David Rutley), made clear yesterday, we are looking urgently at how we reform labelling to ensure that the safety of the consumer is guaranteed. Recent tragic events underline the need for action, and we will act.

John Redwood (Wokingham) (Con): Why does schedule 3 give too wide-ranging powers to Welsh Ministers to offer financial support to food production and food-related businesses that are denied to England? Will my right hon. Friend not speak for England? He is England’s Agriculture Minister. Surely he can trust himself with those important powers. Does he not understand that we really do want more food production domestically and locally?

Michael Gove: I am grateful to my right hon. Friend for making two important points. First, at the beginning of the Bill we stress that grants can be made by any Secretary of State for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs to improve food productivity in the United Kingdom, but we have also made provisions so that the Welsh Government and the Northern Ireland Assembly can follow their own policies in their devolved Administrations in tune with the principle of respecting the devolution settlement across the United Kingdom. I regret that the Scottish Government have not taken advantage of such provisions, despite repeated lobbying from Members of Parliament who represent Scottish farming constituencies. I hope that the Scottish Government and the excellent Minister, Fergus Ewing, will pay attention to the demands from my hon. Friends, who have been crystal clear that the Bill provides a greater degree of clarity and certainty about food production and the environment than the Scottish Government have yet been capable of providing.

Mr Speaker: I call Chris Davies.

Chris Davies (Brecon and Radnorshire) (Con): Thank you, Mr Speaker. I preferred the way my right hon. Friend was conducting matters, as I would have been called first.

Is a specific, ring-fenced budget for agriculture to be agreed under the Bill? Will there be ring-fenced provision for the devolved Governments in times to come?

Michael Gove: I do not know whether I am Karajan, Furtwängler or Mahler, but one thing I do know is how vital it is to listen to Welsh male voices, such as my hon. Friend’s. He is absolutely right. That is why shortly we will publish the terms of reference for a review of funding across the United Kingdom. I can guarantee, however, that agricultural funding will not be Barnettised, and the generous—rightly generous—settlement that gives Northern Ireland, Scotland and Wales more than England will be defended. More than that, I underline in particular the fact that we provide for all UK farmers a greater guarantee of future funding than farmers anywhere else in the European Union enjoy. Our funding is guaranteed until 2022, whereas in the EU the current common agricultural policy is guaranteed only to 2020. UK farmers have greater financial certainty than farmers anywhere else in Europe.

Dr Sarah Wollaston (Totnes) (Con): The chief medical officer, Dame Sally Davies, has described antimicrobial resistance as a “catastrophic threat”, and the Secretary of State will know that it is not only in human healthcare but sometimes in farming that we see inappropriate use of antimicrobials, thus increasing the risk that we will lose their benefit to human health. Will he use the Bill as a vehicle to drive down further inappropriate antimicrobial prescribing in agriculture and to incentivise farmers who do the right thing? Will he also make sure that we are not exposed to products from places around the world where antimicrobials are used wholly inappropriately, including with environmental contamination?

Michael Gove: The Chair of the Select Committee on Health and Social Care makes an absolutely important point. I have had the opportunity to talk to Dame Sally Davies, who has written a brilliant short book about the vital importance of dealing with antimicrobial resistance. I should also pay tribute to Lord O’Neill, who led work under Prime Minister David Cameron on this. My hon. Friend is absolutely right to say that the Bill contains provisions to provide support and payments to farmers who take the appropriate animal health and welfare measures to ensure that we can fight the overuse of antibiotics, which is both a threat to human and animal health, and an environmental danger.

Sir Patrick McLoughlin (Derbyshire Dales) (Con): May I go back to the point made by my right hon. Friend the Member for Wokingham (John Redwood) about schedule 3, which gives specific powers to Wales? Is the Secretary of State telling the House that those specific powers are available to England as well?
Michael Gove: The powers in Wales are different, but we have powers for improving productivity and providing farmers with the grants, support and loans they need not just to improve productivity but to ensure that producer organisations can work effectively in the market to secure for UK farmers, whether in England or in Wales, all the advantages they need to market effectively and secure the right price for their product.

Theresa Villiers (Chipping Barnet) (Con): Will the Secretary of State use the new system of farm support to discourage the intensive farming methods that can lead to low welfare standards and the overuse of antibiotics?

Michael Gove: At the heart of everything we wish to do is making sure that we have an ethical approach and that farmers in the UK, who, overwhelmingly, are doing the right thing and leading the way in progressive farming, are supported. One thing I should say, which I believe is mentioned in the policy statement that accompanied the publication of this Bill, is that Dame Glenys Stacey is leading a review of farm inspection, because one problem we have at the moment is that, notwithstanding the good efforts of our field force, the level and intensity of farm inspection is not what we need it to be in order to ensure the very highest animal welfare and environmental standards.

Several hon. Members rose—

Michael Gove: I shall seek to make some progress, because I know that more than 30 Government Members and some 14 Opposition Members wish to speak in this debate. I hope the House will recognise that I have been generous in accepting interventions. I will say a little more about the contents of the Bill before, of course, listening to the contributions in this debate.

I should preface my remarks by saying that I want to pay a particular tribute not just to my predecessors in this role, my right hon. Friends the Members for North Shropshire (Mr Paterson), for Meriden (Dame Caroline Spelman) and for South West Norfolk (Elizabeth Truss), for the work they have done to ensure that DEFRA has been well led in recent years, but to the Minister for Agriculture, Fisheries and Food, my hon. Friend the Member for Camborne and Redruth (George Eustice). This week marks his fifth year in DEFRA. I think everyone from across the House will agree that someone who was brought up in farming, who has dedicated his whole life to getting the best possible deal for British agriculture and who has been exceptionally thoughtful, courteous and wise guide to a succession of DEFRA Secretaries deserves the House’s thanks and congratulations. [Hon. Members: “Hear, hear.”]

I also wish to stress my gratitude to those from devolved Administrations. As we know, sadly there is no Assembly in Northern Ireland, but the excellent civil servants who work in the Department of Agriculture, Environment and Rural Affairs have been instrumental in making sure that provisions are there for Northern Ireland in this Bill. I also want to pay tribute to Lesley Griffiths of the Welsh Assembly and Fergus Ewing of the Scottish Government. Lesley Griffiths has taken advantage of the provisions in this Bill, as a number of Members have pointed out, to shape a settlement specific for Wales. I am delighted that the Labour Government in Wales are supporting the Bill, even if not every Labour Member here is taking the same pragmatic and positive line.

This Bill will set a clear direction for the future of agriculture. It will ensure that farmers have time to make the appropriate changes required: there will be a seven-year transition period from 2021 in order to enable our farmers to take advantage of the new opportunities that this Bill provides. We believe that strikes the right balance between addressing the urgency of the need for change in order to reward farmers better for the environmental and other public goods that they provide, and providing people with an opportunity to change their business model, if necessary, in order to take advantage of those changes in a staged and appropriate way.

It is striking that during the consultation we undertook on what should replace the common agricultural policy there was a universal embrace of the need for change; not one of the submissions we received argued that the CAP status quo should remain. It is striking also that in the pages of The Guardian George Monbiot, not naturally a friend or supporter of Conservative Governments, points out that this legislation takes us in the right direction. It is striking also that the National Farmers Union has pointed out that although it understandably would like to see more detail about how these schemes would operate—that detail will be forthcoming—it, along with the Country Land and Business Association, The Wildlife Trusts and Greener UK, welcomes the direction in which this Government are taking agriculture.

Of course, one reason why no one can defend the current system is that it allocates public money—taxpayers’ money—purely on the size of an agricultural landholding. As we know, many of the beneficiaries are not even UK or EU citizens, but foreign citizens who happen to have invested in agricultural land. Many people have made the point, as the hon. Member for Bishop Auckland (Helen Goodman) and my hon. Friend the Member for Brecon and Radnorshire have done today, that we must support our upland farmers particularly well. At the moment, the CAP does not give the bulk of its funds to those who are farming in marginal or upland areas; it gives the bulk of its funds to major landowners. It is a simple matter of social justice and economic efficiency that we need to change that system.

Simon Hoare (North Dorset) (Con): The approach my right hon. Friend has adopted of building the big tent coalition in support of the Bill’s principal aims and objectives is the right one. However, will he address a concern that I have? Will he confirm that food production and food security are integral parts of the Bill, and that farming and food production are seen as important and not as an attractive add-on to broader environmental issues?

Michael Gove: My hon. Friend is right about that. When I was visiting an agricultural show recently—that is one of the many pleasures of this job—I was talking to a farmer who, although wholly supportive of the approach we were taking, reminded me that if we want all the environmental benefits that our farmers can produce, because they are responsible for 70% of the landscape of the United Kingdom, we must ensure that farms remain profitable businesses. This Bill will not...
only reward farmers for the public goods they provide, but provide a platform for increased productivity, because food production is at the heart of every farm business—as that farmer reminded me, “You can’t go green if you are in the red.”

Mr Jim Cunningham (Coventry South) (Lab): Will the Secretary of State spell out what assurances he can actually give on food standards and various other standards that apply to this Bill? A lot of people want assurances on that and, in particular, environmental issues too.

Michael Gove: I absolutely agree with the hon. Gentleman that consumers are increasingly demanding, and rightly so, about the provenance, quality and standards of the food being produced. As my right hon. Friend the Member for East Devon made clear, we have the opportunity to reform our labelling system, to ensure both that human health and safety are better protected than ever before and that people have a guarantee of the circumstances in which their food has been produced.

Alan Brown (Kilmarnock and Loudoun) (SNP): The Secretary of State is well aware that the UK Government withheld £160 million of convergence uplift money that was due to Scottish farmers. How much lobbying have Scottish Tory MPs done to recover that £160 million? How much of that money have they secured for Scottish farmers?

Michael Gove: I mentioned earlier that an enjoyable part of my job is visiting agricultural shows, where I have had the opportunity of meeting Scottish MSPs, but I have never met a Scottish National party MP at any agricultural show in Scotland that I have visited. I have seen my hon. Friend the Member for Banff and Buchan (David Duguid) standing up for Scottish farmers. I have seen my hon. Friend the Member for Ochil and South Perthshire (Luke Graham) standing up for Scottish farmers. I have seen my hon. Friend the Member for Gordon (Colin Clark) standing up for Scottish farmers. I have seen my hon. Friend the Member for Stirling (Stephen Kerr) standing up for Scottish farmers. I have visited farms with my hon. Friend the Member for Angus (Kirstene Hair). We can tell by the representation of Scottish Conservative Members here today, and by the dearth of SNP Members, who stands up for rural Scotland. The hon. Gentleman makes a signal and it shows exactly what the Scottish Government are doing for Scotland’s farmers—sweet zero.

Food production is critical, and making sure that farmers get a fair price for their products is important. For too long, farmers have been price takers, because there has been inadequate information about how supply chains work and inadequate powers to intervene. The Government have a duty to step in to support farmers, and we have in this Bill powers to ensure that the data is there for farmers to get a fair price at the farm gate for their produce and, in the event of severe market disturbances, that we can also intervene to ensure that farmers get a fair price.

There is one other critical thing. I mentioned the role of producer organisations earlier. Collaboration is critical not just in delivering environmental improvements at landscape scale, but in making sure that farmers get a fair price for what they produce. This Bill makes provision for increased collaboration.

Mr Barry Sheerman (Huddersfield) (Lab/Co-op): I am enjoying the speech—not all of it, but most of it—but I hope that the Secretary of State will remember not just to tilt at windmills that are easily demolished, but to take on vested interest that will oppose him. I would like to hear more on the supermarkets. The role of the supermarkets in the agricultural and food sectors in this country is very dominant and sometimes very negative. Is he willing to take them on?

Michael Gove: I appreciate the vital importance of supermarkets and other retailers. The powers that we are taking in this Bill should ensure that farmers get a fair price. However, I do want to stress—I had an opportunity to do so briefly earlier—the increasingly progressive role that those leading our supermarkets and our food retailers are taking. They are responding to consumer demand for more information about where food comes from. They are also responding to some of the criticisms in the past about the uniformity of vegetables that are capable of being sold. The Co-op and others who have responded to Hugh Fearnley-Whittingstall’s campaign for wonky veg—I am all in favour of wonky veg—are doing the right thing. The hon. Gentleman is right: we do need to remain vigilant both for the consumer and for the food producer to ensure that we have the right outcomes.

Jonathan Edwards (Carmarthen East and Dinefwr) (PC): I am glad that the Secretary of State has turned his attention to the food supply chain. He will be aware, I am sure, of the reforms introduced last week by the French Government that will radically alter the power within the supply chain away from supermarkets to the producer. Is that something that the British Government are looking at?

Michael Gove: I am always interested in what we can learn from France. We want to make sure that food and drink, which is our biggest manufacturing sector overall, can continue to be world leading. Critical to that, as the hon. Gentleman mentioned and as I acknowledged in responding to the hon. Member for Huddersfield (Mr Sheerman), is making sure that there is a fair price at the farm gate for our food producers. Our farmers do not want subsidy; what they want is fairness, and that is what this Bill seeks to deliver.

Talking of fairness, I just want to stress the critical importance of recognising what a public good is. There has been some debate over what a public good might mean. It is some time since I studied economics, but public goods have a clear definition: they are non-exclusionary and non-rivalrous. We can all enjoy them, and as we all enjoy them, no one, if they are enjoying a public good, does so at the expense of anyone else. I am talking about clean air, soil quality and making sure that we invest in carbon sequestration, that farmers get supported for the work that they do to keep our rivers clean and our water pure, that the public have access to our glorious countryside and that the contribution that farmers make to animal health and welfare is recognised. We all benefit from those public goods, but, at the moment, our farmers are not adequately rewarded for
they. We in the UK spend a higher proportion of common agricultural policy funds on rural development and on environmental schemes than any other country in the European Union—I should say that the Welsh Administration lead the way in this—but far too much of our money still goes on coupled support based on hectarage payments, rather than on rewarding farmers for what they do and on giving DEFRA the opportunity to intervene to give farmers the deal that they deserve.

Ruth George (High Peak) (Lab): again at DEFRA’s decision last week not to award grants to small abattoirs as is being done in Wales?

Michael Gove: I am very happy to give way to—ah—the hon. Member for High Peak (Ruth George).

Ruth George: I congratulate the Secretary of State on his reading ability. He has mentioned animal welfare. Various Members have asked about the difference between Wales and England. Local abattoirs are very important—as important as farms—to high standards of animal welfare. Will he commit to supporting small abattoirs, a third of which have closed already, in the investment that they need to comply with the regulations and to looking again at DEFRA’s decision last week not to award grants to small abattoirs as is being done in Wales?

Michael Gove: It is important that we have a network of abattoirs that enables, wherever possible, sustainable local food production. I know that it is an issue close to the hon. Lady’s heart; it is also close to mine. I pay tribute to Patrick Holden and the sustainable farming network for the campaigning work that they have done. We are doing everything we can to support small abattoirs. When it comes to animal welfare, it is also important that we make sure that we have a strong network of official veterinarians guaranteeing the quality of our food. It is also important that we recognise that this Government—originally under the leadership of my right hon. Friend the Member for South Northamptonshire (Andrea Leadsom)—have introduced, or required, CCTV in all abattoirs to make sure that there is no hiding place for animal cruelty. It is critical that we recognise that our farmers thrive on the basis of producing high-quality food with animal welfare at its heart.

Kerry McCarthy (Bristol East) (Lab): In the timeline that was published this morning, it says that higher animal welfare standards will be defined in 2020. Will the Secretary of State assure me that the bar for those will not be set any lower than they are at present? Ideally, they should be considerably higher.

Michael Gove: Absolutely. I recognise that I have been on my feet, although taking questions, for 27 minutes now, so I do want to draw my remarks to close.

Jamie Stone (Caithness, Sutherland and Easter Ross) (LD): again at DEFRA’s decision last week not to award grants to small abattoirs as is being done in Wales?

Michael Gove: I must give way to the hon. Gentleman.

Jamie Stone: I can assure the right hon. Gentleman that he would be very welcome to come and visit us at the Black Isle show next summer. It is self-evident to me that we cannot do much with the straths and glens in my constituency other than rear sheep. I want to push him on one other point. Tourism depends on seeing our straths and glens populated with livestock and on vibrant and successful farming. May I push him for his comments on the tourism aspect of agriculture?

Michael Gove: I thank the hon. Gentleman for his point. I would be delighted to visit the Black Isle show and also to visit Lairg in his constituency, where I know that some of Scotland’s finest sheep farmers have an opportunity every year to demonstrate what they can do. He is absolutely right: iconic landscapes from Caithness and Sutherland and Easter Ross through to the Lake District and, indeed, Exmoor and Dartmoor depend for their tourist appeal and for their pull on the human heart on the work of our farmers. It is inconceivable that those iconic landscapes could survive and flourish without the rural, economic and social network that sheep farming and other forms of farming provide. Absolutely, we do recognise that. It is a public good, and public access to our countryside is placed here.

Alex Chalk (Cheltenham) (Con): to intervene to give farmers the deal that they deserve.

Nick Boles (Grantham and Stamford) (Con): Absolutely, we do recognise that. It is a public good, and public access to our countryside is placed here.

Michael Gove: I know how important the environment and animal welfare issues are to my hon. Friend, as he has tirelessly campaigned on them. I also know that his constituents will be able to enjoy improved access to the countryside through the provisions in the Bill. My right hon. Friend the Secretary of State for Education is making £10 million available to ensure that more schoolchildren have an opportunity to understand what goes on in our countryside. Making sure that the next generation understands where our food comes from and the vital importance of food production will be absolutely critical. When the Department for Education set up the school food plan and when this Government ensured that all children up to the age of 14 received lessons in where food comes from and in cooking, that was an earnest example of our commitment to ensuring that everyone appreciates the vital importance of our farmers and the work that they do.

Nick Boles: I am seduced by the vision of the future of British agriculture painted by the Secretary of State, but I am puzzled why he wants to take so long before he can get started on it. Why do we have to remain trapped in the limbo of the transition, whereby we will still be trapped in the common agricultural policy when, by joining the European Free Trade Association and the European economic area on our way out of the EU, we could start on his magnificent reforms next March?
Michael Gove: I am delighted to have been able to seduce my hon. Friend. What is striking in the seduction is that, rather than asking for a slower hand, he wants a rough wooing. He makes the best possible case for his proposition, but I must respectfully disagree with him. The transition period, both the one that is being secured as we leave the European Union and the one for our farmers, is the right balance between urgency and space for reform.

Helen Whately (Faversham and Mid Kent) (Con): My right hon. Friend was talking about public goods—an approach that I welcome. May I bring him to the question of health? Can he assure me that his Bill will support the production of fruit and vegetables in this country, which is so important to the nation’s health?

Michael Gove: Absolutely; the consumption of more fruit and vegetables is critical to improving public health. I am delighted that, thanks to the lobbying of my hon. Friend and so many Conservative Members, we were able to introduce a seasonal workers scheme pilot to ensure that fruit and vegetable growers get the support that they deserve. We will also have new schemes—improved over those that the EU provides—to ensure that the producer organisations that represent our growers continue to do the brilliant job that they do.

I should stress that the Bill will also ensure that the UK can take its seat at the World Trade Organisation and negotiate on behalf of the whole United Kingdom. Some people have suggested that the Bill constitutes a power grab from our devolved Administrations—nothing could be further from the truth. The Bill will empower the Welsh Assembly, the Northern Ireland Government and the Scottish Government to do what they believe is right for our farmers, and what is right for our farmers is to move away from a system that has constrained their energy, undermined their enterprise, held back innovation in food production and inadequately rewarded them not only for the food that they provide, but for the environmental and other goods that they provide for us.

The Bill gives us an opportunity to put farming across the United Kingdom on a surer footing, so that we can produce more, sell more and export more, but also hand on our environment in a better state to the next generation. I commend it to the House.

Several hon. Members rose—

Madam Deputy Speaker (Dame Eleanor Laing): It will be very obvious from the number of people now on their feet that there is a huge demand for time to speak this afternoon. Although we have many hours ahead, I will have to impose a time limit from the very beginning. I give warning now—so that people can throw away pages and pages of their notes—that the time limit will initially be eight minutes, and I anticipate that it might well reduce later.

1.42 pm

Sue Hayman (Workington) (Lab): I beg to move an amendment, to leave out from “That” to the end of the Question and add:

“this House, whilst recognising that on leaving the EU the UK needs to shift agricultural support from land-based payments to the delivery of environmental and other public benefits, declines to give a Second Reading to the Agriculture Bill because it fails to provide a strategy to safeguard the nation’s food supply at a time when food poverty and foodbank demand are rising rapidly alongside an epidemic in food-related health inequality, fails to recognise the central importance of UK sustainable food production and supply, leading to a greater reliance on imports, while failing to provide for controls over the production methods, working conditions, or animal welfare and environmental standards in countries from which the UK’s food is imported, and, when the natural environment is in crisis, with species decline at an alarming scale, soil degradation and increasingly volatile and extreme weather conditions driven by escalating climate change, provides the Secretary of State with wide-ranging powers but no duties or legally enforceable environmental protection targets, whilst giving Parliament limited ability to scrutinise any changes in the regime, and fails to legislate for current funding to continue until 2022 as Ministers have promised; and is of the opinion that the publication of such a Bill should have been preceded by a full process of pre-legislative scrutiny of a draft Bill.”

This country is in desperate need of an Agriculture Bill that provides certainty and clarity for our food and farming industry, but instead the Secretary of State has laid before us nothing but a huge missed opportunity. There are no targets for environmental improvements or reducing carbon emissions; there is no commitment to producing healthy, home-grown food in a post-Brexit world, and there is no commitment to protecting the people of this country from food poverty at a time when thousands rely on food banks. We need an Agriculture Bill, but we need it to be better than this.

The Labour party absolutely agrees with the need to shift financial assistance in the way proposed by the Bill, from support for simply owning land to the principle of public money for public goods to help those who work our land to restore and improve the natural environment. This has been rightly welcomed by environmental campaigners as a real turnaround in the Government’s thinking. I join those campaigners in applauding the Secretary of State in this regard, because—make no mistake—our natural environment is in crisis, with soil degradation, species in alarming decline, increasingly volatile and extreme weather conditions, and air pollution that has remained at illegal levels since 2010. But does the Bill actually match up to the scale of the environmental crisis facing us?

The Bill provides only powers. Clause 1 states that the Secretary of State “may” give financial assistance for environmental purposes—there is no duty or requirement for him to actually do anything. The environmental outcomes we need delivered are not prescribed. There are no targets and no mechanism for setting any targets. No funding is identified in the Bill. No delivery or regulatory bodies will be resourced by it.

Geraint Davies: My hon. Friend is making a marvellous speech. She will be aware of the warning from the UN Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change that we will reach the 1.5°C threshold in 12 years, by 2030, and of the contribution of cattle and agriculture in general towards our carbon emissions. Does that not underline the importance of having targets, which are so sadly missing from this Bill?

Sue Hayman: My hon. Friend makes an extremely important point. The report was deeply shocking and the Bill must reflect that urgent action needs to be taken.

Let me bring the Secretary of State’s green Brexit dream into the cold light of day. At first contact with the Chancellor and all the other competing demands on
the Treasury, the reality is that the Secretary of State’s green Brexit will soon wither on the vine without any commitment written into the Bill to maintain the current levels of spending. Farmers and green campaigners are in complete alignment on this.

Debbie Abrahams (Oldham East and Saddleworth) (Lab): My hon. Friend is making a very powerful speech. I had hoped to intervene on the Secretary of State but he refused to let me. I would have told him that many small upland livestock producers in my constituency are really concerned about the lack of detail in the Bill, particularly given that the Secretary of State says that he wants to support them and enhance their profitability. Does my hon. Friend share my concern about when we might get this detail and whether the Government will even consider the different scenarios that Brexit could bring to these upland producers?

Sue Hayman: My hon. Friend makes an important point. There are also many upland farmers in my constituency, and they have raised exactly the same concerns with me.

We know that for farmers to be sustainable environmentally, they must also be sustainable economically. I remind the Secretary of State who the farmer he quoted earlier actually was: Minette Batters, president of the National Farmers Union, who said that farmers cannot be green if they are in the red. Farmers need to be able to invest with certainty over long periods, especially in sectors such as forestry. How can they be expected to stay afloat when the Secretary of State has proved himself unable to make good in the Bill any of the funding promises?

Jonathan Edwards: The hon. Lady is making a very sensible point, specifically regarding basic payments for farmers. However, the post-Brexit agricultural policy of the Welsh Labour Government more or less mirrors exactly what has been proposed by the Secretary of State. After the hon. Lady finishes her speech, will she get on the phone to the branch manager, Carwyn Jones, and tell him to introduce a more sensible policy?

Sue Hayman: Well, I think that more powers are provided in this Bill for some Welsh Ministers than for English Ministers. I have had a long discussion with my counterparts in the Welsh Government and will continue to work with them to discuss these points.

Alan Brown: Will the hon. Lady explain why the Welsh Government appear to be supporting this Bill and the European Union (Withdrawal) Act 2018, yet her colleagues are opposing this legislation?

Sue Hayman: As I have said, we believe that greater powers are provided for Welsh Ministers than English Ministers in this Bill; there is more certainty. It is really important that we bring that back.

On Sunday, I attended a harvest festival at my local church, and I am sure that many hon. Members did something similar. I know that the whole House will join me in expressing our thankfulness for everything that the farming community in this country achieves to help feed the nation, often against the odds. After the extreme weather that farmers endured last winter and this summer, they are probably more affected by climate change than any other sector.

However, agriculture now accounts for 10% of UK greenhouse gas emissions—a larger share than at any time since 1990—and the Committee on Climate Change has reported that there has been virtually no change in agricultural emissions since 2008. This means that agricultural emissions are not on track to deliver the carbon budget savings required by 2022.

Net carbon sequestration from forestry has flatlined but the Bill provides only for mitigating or adapting to climate change. It seems that the Secretary of State has not heard the Committee’s call, made only in June, for this Bill to link financial support to agricultural emissions reduction and increased carbon sequestration.

Caroline Lucas: Does the hon. Lady agree that the Bill needs to have a net zero emissions target for the agricultural sector? If we shifted to more support for organic farming, that would help too: organic soils are much better at retaining carbon than intensively farmed soil.

Sue Hayman: The hon. Lady makes a good point. It is critical that we begin looking across all industries to see how we can shift to net zero.

James Heappey (Wells) (Con): Will the hon. Lady explain how much, according to her calculations, it will cost to achieve net zero in agriculture? Will that be met from general taxation through the Government or through increased food prices at the supermarket?

Sue Hayman: I do not believe that I made that commitment, so it is not something on which I have done calculations at this time.

Continuing to deplete soils, lose pollinators and pollute waters does nothing for farm productivity; that is why we need a Bill that delivers food security as well as environmental outcomes. It is self-defeating and academic to separate those objectives, as the Secretary of State is attempting to do. This is the first time in more than 40 years that a Secretary of State has been directly responsible for the nation’s food security, yet food security has drifted off the Government’s agenda, and they are not offering any clear vision for the future of our nation’s food supply. The Bill is worryingly silent when it comes to food poverty. It says nothing about the balance between the production of healthy and sustainable British food and reliance on imports, the jobs and health and safety of agricultural workers, and preventing trade deals involving lower standards, undercutting British producers.

It is 71 years since the Agriculture Act 1947 was passed by the great post-war Attlee Government. Attlee judged that its author Tom Williams “affected nothing less than a revolution in British agriculture” and that “his place in history is assured as the greatest British Minister of Agriculture of all time”.

I remind the House that the purpose of the Act was “promoting and maintaining a stable and efficient agricultural industry capable of producing such part of the nation’s food and other agricultural produce as in the national interest it is desirable to produce in the United Kingdom, and of producing it at
minimum prices consistently with proper remuneration and living conditions for farmers and workers in agriculture and an adequate return on capital invested in the industry.”

Article 39 of the treaty of Rome set out the aims of the common agricultural policy, including ensuring “a fair standard of living for the agricultural community...the availability of supplies”, and that “supplies reach consumers at reasonable prices.”

It is a matter of strategic national interest and social justice that we should ensure that our country is better able to feed itself with healthy, nutritional food while protecting itself against volatility. That is why it is important for sustainable food production to be a central part of the Bill.

**John Redwood:** Why did we lose so much market share and end up importing so much food under the CAP?

**Sue Hayman:** That is a good question, but one to which I do not have a detailed answer—I apologise to the right hon. Gentleman for that. It is a really important point: we were increasing production, but then it began to drop. It is an issue that we need to address. If there is a dramatic reduction in UK food production, greater reliance on imports would result in a lack of control over production, animal welfare, and environmental and working standards.

**James Cartlidge** (South Suffolk) (Con): The answer lies simply in the tastes of the consumer. We like oranges—we like food that grows abroad but which we do not grow. That demand has grown over the years, so we import more. We should be careful lest we try to search for set levels of output or demand in what is still a market economy.

**Sue Hayman:** Clearly, we cannot grow everything that consumers would like to purchase in this country, but we can do more to increase the production of food that can be produced in this country. It is important that we protect standards too, and any trading deals should protect the standards that our farmers currently work to.

**Simon Hoare:** I think the answer will be yes, but does the hon. Lady agree that it will be a hallmark of success for the whole Brexit process if, 10 or 15 years down the line, we find that we are importing no more foodstuffs than we do today, and preferably less because we are producing more?

**Sue Hayman:** The hon. Gentleman makes an important point.

I would like to think about health, because the Bill fails to recognise the importance of food and diet for health. Why, when we spend so much money subsidising our food producers, are so many of them on the verge of bankruptcy or breakdown? Why is there so much wasted food when foodbank demand has never been higher? While the quality of our home-produced food has never been higher, why do we have an epidemic of obesity and diabetes? The Bill completely misses the opportunity to tackle those problems. We need a Bill that strengthens and enshrines support for sustainable food production, promotes healthy outcomes and supports rural economies, because we believe that access to good-quality, healthy food must not be allowed to become the preserve of only those who can afford it.

**Rebecca Pow** (Taunton Deane) (Con): Given the shadow Minister’s concern about these issues—green Brexit, food, food waste and all those things—it is interesting that she was not given a major slot on the main stage at the Labour conference. In my meetings, I have not come across a single environmentalist or farmer who does not support the initiatives in the Bill.

**Sue Hayman:** The hon. Lady may recall that the Leader of the Opposition discussed the environment and issues connected with the Department for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs in his speech.

All over the world, nearly all farmers are supported financially to produce food, and our farmers must be able to compete with them, but to do so they will need the right financial and policy framework so that they are not disadvantaged in a competitive and volatile global marketplace. We need to move away from the current system of direct payments, but if we are to bring in land management contracts, they need to be accessible. The recent delivery of payments to farmers and landowners has been poor, and the hoops that have to be jumped through put many people off signing up in the first place. We need to ensure that the agencies are adequately resourced—only then can they properly help the farmers who need the support that subsidies provide.

**Ruth George:** Does my hon. Friend agree that, given their excellent relationships with farmers and landscape managers, national parks are ideally placed to provide that network in our national park areas, where so much farming goes on?

**Sue Hayman:** I thank the right hon. Gentleman for that important contribution. I have discussed that with the Lake District national park, which is in my constituency, and I am sure that there will be other discussions in this area.

**Sir Hugo Swire:** An important point was made about the number of forms that farmers have to fill in to access funds. Does the honourable not agree that one of the most important things is ensuring the availability of reliable broadband, given that the amount of farming now done online is way in excess of the amount of farming when Clement Atlee was the post-war Prime Minister?

**Sue Hayman:** I thank the right hon. Gentleman for that important contribution. It is disappointing that the digital roll-out came before farmers could access it. I would add that mobile connectivity is as important, because when farmers submit their application online, they are sent a text message with a code that they need to put in: if they do not have a mobile signal, they cannot continue with the application. All these things need to be considered before we move forward.

We praise all our farmers for the important role that they play in environmental stewardship. The Secretary of State talked about the fact that the food and drinks industry is such a huge manufacturing sector. It is incredibly important that we get more support for our farmers than the Bill currently offers. At the moment,
the Bill offers our family farmers just a payoff, which we believe risks leaving our fields to ever larger, more intensive factory farms run by global big business.

It worries me that the vision of the UK as a leading free trade nation with low tariff barriers is completely at odds with the commitment to thriving British food and farming sectors. Combining and delivering those two objectives will be a considerable challenge for this Government, who are and always have been in favour of more deregulation and who have a blind reliance on the free market to deliver social outcomes. Labour will oppose any free trade deal that threatens existing standards: we will fight any such deals tooth and nail.

In conclusion, the development of a new post-Brexit UK agriculture policy is a seminal moment for the future of our environment, our food production and our countryside. Never has it been more important to lift our line of sight and to talk proactively about what we want to see as part of a long-term strategy for food, farming and the environment. Sustainability, above all else, has to be at the forefront of a thriving farming, food and drink sector.

It is right that we shift agricultural support for land-based payments to the delivery of public and environmental benefits, but the Bill sadly falls short in a number of areas. There is no strategy to safeguard our nation’s food supply or recognition of the importance of sustainability to reduce the reliance on imports. There is no provision for controls over production methods, working conditions, animal welfare or environmental standards in countries from which our food is imported. The Bill hands wide-ranging powers to the Secretary of State but includes no legally enforceable environmental protection targets, and there is no provision for current agricultural funding to continue until 2022, as Ministers have previously promised.

This House should have had the chance to conduct proper prelegislative scrutiny of the Bill. What we are discussing here is fundamental to the future of British agriculture, and getting it right is crucial. For those reasons, I am afraid that Labour cannot support the Bill’s Second Reading, and that is why I strongly urge colleagues to vote for our reasoned amendment tonight.

2.3 pm

Neil Parish (Tiverton and Honiton) (Con): This is an historic moment, as we last had an agriculture Bill in this House in 1947, since when there have been 15 Prime Ministers and many Governments. We therefore really need to get this Bill right.

The Bill is about agriculture and the environment not just today, but in the future, so I welcome our Secretary of State’s commitment on food security. During the Bill’s passage, I will look for us to adopt for England provisions similar to those in schedule 3 for Wales to ensure that we can support high-quality food production and high animal welfare standards in England and across the United Kingdom. Food security—the ability to have plenty of food, and good food, for our constituents—is very much a public good, and we will debate that further.

While I very much welcome the Bill, I am disappointed that my Select Committee was not offered the opportunity to subject it to prelegislative scrutiny. However, the Secretary of State and Ministers should not worry, because we will do our utmost to ensure that we scrutinise the Bill carefully, clause by clause. While the Bill is very good, I am sure that a little tweak here and there will not do it any harm.

I welcome the long transitional period because it gives farmers certainty over that time. We also need to ensure that as we build stewardship schemes, land management schemes and environmental schemes, we also enter into contracts with farmers of at least five to 10 years. Ministers and the Secretary of State might say that we cannot bind successive Governments, but we must ensure that we have a contract in place so that land management and farming can go hand in hand. We talk as though the environment, food production and farming are all separate, but they are not—they are very much combined. I believe that farmers are the original friends of the earth, and we will ensure that we deliver better soil, a better environment and great food while having as much food security as possible in this country.

I also welcome the Bill’s attempt to tackle unfairness in the supply chain.

Sir Oliver Letwin (West Dorset) (Con): Before my hon. Friend moves on, I share his ambition in those respects, but does he agree that as the general framework for subsidy support or payment for ecosystem services lies in this Bill, and the general framework for the environment will lie in the environment Bill, it is appropriate that issues such as the contracting he describes should be covered in secondary legislation?

Neil Parish: Welcome my right hon. Friend. He is right that that can be dealt with in secondary legislation, but I am, shall I say, a little bit naturally suspicious, so I am trying to ensure that we get everything covered as soon as possible. I like the Bill’s direction of travel towards the environment, but I am convinced that having good, healthy, affordable food is absolutely essential, and that is one of the issues towards which I will maintain my driving forces.

Sir Oliver Letwin: I am grateful to my hon. Friend for giving way again. The question of how the Select Committee will proceed under his chairmanship seems an important one to resolve. I think that many of us would welcome his driving on that issue, as long as it is done in a way that recognises that we are not trying to build it into the two pieces of primary legislation, which would confuse the issue.

Neil Parish: I will take on board my right hon. Friend’s wisdom, and we will look at that as we go through the Select Committee process to ensure that do not do that. I thank him for his intervention.

The Bill very much attempts to tackle unfairness in the supply chain. That is essential. We need to ensure that the groceries code covers all aspects of trade—from the big retailers through to the processors and right down to the big suppliers—so that we can have true fairness in the supply chain. Often, when a consumer buys a product, enough money is paid to the retailer to ensure that there is enough money for the producer, and it is a question of ensuring that that money then gets back to the producer. There is an uneven relationship, with producers often being the weaker partner and not having enough strength in the market.
I welcome the proposals to request data, which will improve transparency in the supply chain, but the way in which that increased transparency will improve fairness in the supply chain remains unclear. Furthermore, there are proposals to streamline support payments and reduce bureaucracy, which I believe we all welcome. I look forward to the Secretary of State and the farming Minister coming before our Select Committee to explain exactly how that can be done. Whether people love or hate the common agricultural policy, there is no doubt that we can have an agricultural policy that suits the four nations of the United Kingdom and that we can devise a better system than the one designed for the 28 countries of the European Union. I have direct knowledge of that, having previously chaired the European Parliament’s Agriculture Committee, so I know that we can do better and I look forward to that.

We welcome this once-in-a-lifetime opportunity to shape British farming and the environment. We can improve policies such as our stewardship scheme, for example by ensuring that it runs for a minimum of 10 years and involves forestry. We can also ensure that we do not have to work out when a tree is a sapling and when a sapling is a tree. If we want to include water management, our schemes can include planting trees on banks to hold back water and so on. We can do so much better, and I look forward to hearing about that from Ministers.

John Grogan (Keighley) (Lab): Does the hon. Gentleman, who chairs the Committee on which I serve, agree that there is a real danger that it will be the big landowners and farmers who will be best able to apply for environmental grants? We have to guard against that by reducing bureaucracy, as he has indicated.

Neil Parish: The hon. Gentleman makes a good point. We have to ensure that applying for grants is simple enough for all farmers, not just the big landowners who can employ offices full of people to do that, and I believe that we can. With some of the ideas coming forward about how we make payments, we can also ensure that, as we transition, family farms and smaller applicants can have less taken from them in the first instance. There are ways we can make this much more palatable.

Upland farming, which the Secretary of State mentioned, is very important, especially because of lamb and beef production. It is coupled with that great environment on the hillside, and we will not be able to pay public money just to keep sheep and cattle on the hillside: we have to ensure that they are profitable. Profit is what will drive this because—this point has already been made—if you are in the black, you can go more green. That is absolutely essential.

We produce great food. We also have a very effective poultry industry, although sometimes that is not mentioned. That is why we can produce good-quality chickens for under £5. Let us look at how we deal with our food industry and our production.

Sir Hugo Swire: Does my hon. Friend agree that post Brexit there will be a real opportunity to buy “British first” through the procurement of British-sourced food?

Neil Parish: My right hon. Friend and constituency neighbour makes a really good point. We must redouble our efforts to encourage our armed forces, our schools and our health service to procure our high-quality British food. Let us ensure that we can feed our nation with our food, because that is absolutely essential.

I also think that healthy food, as a public good, can be recognised naturally across the piece. This is an agricultural Bill, but if we think about the NHS, we could save nearly £2 billion when we consider the type of healthy food that we can produce. Buying from local producers will allow us to reduce our carbon footprint and improve the environment, so we also need joined-up thinking about future-proofing the Bill. If we weaken our farming sector to the extent that we have to import more food from abroad, there will be many consequences. When we import food from other countries, we also import their water and their means of production, and some countries can little afford that. We have to ensure that we continue to produce good, high-quality food and that, if possible, we produce more of it in future.

Deidre Brock (Edinburgh North and Leith) (SNP): It is a pleasure to see so many members of the armed services here to observe the debate—I hope that the Secretary of State was not so alarmed by the prospect of my speech that he called them in.

The Bill lacks a foundation, because as yet there is no Brexit deal and no trade deal. No one here knows what rules will have to be followed in order to allow agricultural produce into the European single market. No one even knows where the UK’s borders will be—perhaps in the middle of the Irish sea. It is that uncertainty that is causing the most concern to farmers and other food producers.

There is a need to be prepared, and I acknowledge that the Department for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs has to try to guess the future framework that will be needed. I appreciate that Ministers have to bring forward proposals for consideration. Being prepared for what is to come seems sensible at first glance. I have to observe, however, that preparing for Brexit is a wee bit like someone blindfolding themselves before jumping off a cliff: they cannot see the horror, but it is still going to hit them pretty hard. I appreciate where Ministers are coming from, but they seem to have gone off a little prematurely. However, that is not all that is wrong with the Bill.

I think it is important that we talk about what agriculture is for, and what it has been for since the first sod was turned: food production. Agriculture is about producing food or it is about nothing. The advantages to the human race of being a species that can produce its own food rather than just hunt or gather it have been immense. There have been some downsides, not least the environmental damage that some farming practices wreak, but agriculture is what has allowed us to build the civilisations and lifestyles that we now have.

Jonathan Edwards: The hon. Lady, my colleague, will of course be aware that during the recess the British Government appointed a food supplies Minister, in preparation for a no deal Brexit—such is the panic at the heart of the British Government. Is it not somewhat incoherent that in agricultural policy there is not that focus on food production that she mentioned, either from the British Government in relation to England or
from the Labour Government in relation to Wales? The Scottish National party Government in Scotland, however, will maintain basic payments to help farmers produce food.

Deidre Brock: I thank my friend the hon. Member for that intervention. I will be coming to that point shortly.

It is agriculture that gives those of us who are worried about the environmental effects the time and space to do that worrying. Agriculture is what lies behind civilisation, because food production and food security—the nourishment of people who can be productive in other ways because they do not have to find or produce their own food—is what underpins the modern economy. Take away the food supply and we destroy the rest of the economy.

John Redwood: Of course, once we leave the EU we will be able to settle our own schedule of tariffs, including those, if any, that we might wish to impose on European continental food. What level of tariff would the hon. Lady recommend?

Deidre Brock: I am not sure what the right hon. Gentleman is speaking about, because we will also have tariffs imposed on us as a result of these discussions, and they are alarming. Lamb farmers in Scotland are certainly very concerned, and a tariff of something like 46% has been suggested to me.

With the stark warnings about chaos in the chain for imported foods post-Brexit, one would think that domestic food security would be top of the agenda in DEFRA just now. As my friend the hon. Member for Carmarthen East and Dinefwr (Jonathan Edwards) has just said, the situation is serious enough for a Minister to be appointed to oversee food supplies. That is the kind of ministerial brief we associate with wars in the middle of the last century. With that kind of concern, which is clearly a feature of Whitehall's panic after failing to plan for Brexit, one would think that domestic food production would be getting a look-in now.

Stewart Malcolm McDonald (Glasgow South) (SNP): During the recess a constituent of mine was in a care home and saw a poster that said:

"Rationing means a fair share for all of us".

Does my hon. Friend think that was nostalgia or forward planning?

Deidre Brock: I certainly hope that we will not get to that situation, because it is an alarming thought. I thank my hon. Friend for that point.

Food production is missing from this Agriculture Bill. We have a Bill to regulate agriculture that is silent on the very essence of agriculture. I appreciate that not every aspect of a portfolio area can be present in every piece of legislation and that there will be times when things are missed, but surely we cannot miss out the core point of the legislation. We really cannot talk about how to regulate or support farming unless we also talk about producing food. Agriculture is not agriculture if it is only land management and form filling.

Colin Clark (Gordon) (Con): The hon. Member for Edinburgh North and Leith, that famous farming constituency, is making a powerful speech.

"The Scottish Government's climate change ambitions...pose a bigger threat...than Brexit".

They are not my words, but those of Jim McLaren of Quality Meat Scotland. Would she care to comment on that?

Deidre Brock: I appreciate the hon. Gentleman's intervention, although I do not really appreciate the snide remarks about Edinburgh North and Leith, because people there actually eat and they are interested in food.

Returning to my subject, which was food, there is plenty in the Bill to allow Ministers to gather information about food chains and to interfere where they see fit, but nothing about how it will change the structures or the framework around producing food or how Ministers might want to protect, improve and increase food production, food security or food quality. We really need to know a bit about the direction of travel. There is nothing in the Bill that tells us, and the public pronouncements of the DEFRA Secretary suggest a move away from support for food production—or farming, as I like to call it—towards a style of support that would be perfect for managers of large estates, but not those with less land. Grouse moors could benefit, but farmers will not.

None of that detail is in the Bill. There is nothing even to suggest a route map, far less lay out the steps that the Government intend to take. There is nothing about the proposed support mechanism. That is massively important. A farm in Cambridgeshire is very unlike a farm in the Yorkshire dales and even more unlike a farm in Sutherland, where my parents-in-law live, let alone one on Scotland's islands. Promises were made to Scottish farmers that Brexit would not see them losing cash, at the same time as convergence cash intended for farms in Scotland was being distributed elsewhere, as my hon. Friend the Member for Kilmarnock and Loudoun (Alan Brown) mentioned.

Andrew Bowie (West Aberdeenshire and Kincardine) (Con): The hon. Lady has spent a lot of time criticising this Government's legislation. I would like to ask the question that many of my constituents who are farmers are wondering about: what is the Scottish Government's plan for farming post Brexit? We have not got a clue.

Deidre Brock: I am rather surprised that the hon. Gentleman has not yet read our very sensible proposal for stability and simplicity, which sets out the route map. Let us not forget either that the Scottish Government were the first UK Administration to set out detailed plans for the short and medium term after Brexit. I suggest that he goes online and has a look at our proposal.

Where now are the pledges and promises that were made? Where are the guarantees for Scottish farmers that they will not lose out? Where in this Bill is the guarantee that the cash going to Scotland for Scotland's farmers will not fall under some newly invented Barnett guillotine or that the additional support that has been available for less favoured areas, which is so important to Scotland, will not simply vanish, like so much else that Scotland is due but Whitehall absorbs? Perhaps we
should be looking for a red bus with some numbers on the side and a promise to Scotland’s farmers of untold riches to come. Without that certainty from Whitehall and the news that the funding for Scotland’s farmers is secure, protected from the Brexit meltdown and protected in the long term, farmers in Scotland cannot start planning for the future, and not even the near future.

I looked at the National Audit Office’s report on DEFRA’s progress in preparing for Brexit and it did not make for pretty reading. It was in fact quite stark, saying:

“DEFRA has not been able to make progress in supporting business in their preparations,”

although it makes it clear that this is partly the fault of the Department for Exiting the European Union for choosing to restrict Departments’ ability to engage with their stakeholders. But whose fault that is will not concern farmers, nor will it be a great concern for those who would like to see food continuing to appear in their shops. The NAO goes on to point out that no information was available on the DEFRA website about the EU exit or any potential changes following Brexit and that, almost ironically, stakeholders such as farmers had to look to the EU agencies’ websites for information about what was likely to follow. The warning about lack of preparedness was pretty stark:

“there is no guidance on Defra’s website for businesses exporting food products to the EU. Some of these may have to apply for an export health certificate for the first time and change trading routes so that their products enter the EU through a border inspection post.”

The most damning part of the report, though, might be the observation that

“DEFRA does not have a clear vision either for the new services and functions it has to introduce or for the organisation as a whole post-EU Exit”.

No clear vision, no plan and no action, but here we are with a Bill to set the future direction. In spite of a 37% increase in the number of legislative staff in the Department, the portfolio board heard in June that DEFRA admitted to the NAO that it will be unable to handle the increase in export health certificates needed for farmers to carry on exporting their produce to the world’s largest single market because it is currently done on a spreadsheet that only one person can operate at a time. The Department’s long-term ambition is to get up to the same standard of e-certification that other nations use, but the Treasury has not yet seen the business justification document in order to approve it. I will lay odds that the costs of sorting that out will be more than the spare change down the back of the DEFRA sofa.

If anyone thought that animal exports getting done over was enough bad news, they had better not look at animal imports. The UK will lose access to the EU’s TRACES, or trade control and expert system. Data on animal imports will have to be entered manually at border inspection posts, so we can expect higher error rates, delays at borders while manual checks are carried out and an increased biosecurity risk, according to DEFRA’s report card from the NAO. Potentially, we will have high-quality beef sitting on one side of the border waiting for its turn on the spreadsheet to get a health certificate for export, while the supermarket lasagne is sitting on the other side waiting for a border guard to punch its information into the system. In the meantime, farmers will be watching their livelihoods disappear, while every truck in the game is held up at the border.

There are two points, parallel to those issues, that are vital to Scotland’s food production and marketing. The first is the need for seasonal workers. My hon. Friend the Member for Perth and North Perthshire (Pete Wishart) will go into our concerns about that at length, but I will quickly add that the pitiful pilot scheme announced recently for seasonal workers would have been laughed at, had we not already seen crops rotting in the fields this year for want of workers to pick them. The other issue is the need for protection in global markets. Those needs are being ignored in Whitehall.

The position on geographical indicators and other protections is similar. The EU currently protects Scottish produce in international markets, including Scotch whisky, Scotch lamb, Scotch beef, the cheeses, Stornoway black pudding, and so on. There are similar products elsewhere—the Melton Mowbray pork pie springs to mind, along with Fenland celery and Yorkshire rhubarb. The Minister of State for Trade Policy gave evidence to a Committee of the Scottish Parliament last month, and said that Scotch whisky would continue to be protected because of the importance of Scotch whisky exports to the UK economy, but that the others were basically up for grabs. He said:

“PGIs present quite serious difficulties in free-trade negotiations because some nations regard them as unfair protection or non-tariff barriers to trade.”

He went on to say that the issue is not straightforward in trade negotiations because we would have to demonstrate market penetration or recognition. In other words, protections in international markets for goods produced here will be negotiating chips on the table in each new trade deal that the UK looks for. Scotland’s farmers, having built a reputation for quality and traceability that helps to sell their products across borders, are about to see their market share threatened, even if they can get through the border posts, because they will be losing easy access to the world’s biggest single marketplace, but also because the protections that the machinery of the EU afford will be stripped away as the UK struggles to learn once again how to negotiate trade deals and negotiates away any protection that our unique products might have had.

It is notable that the briefings on the Bill that I have received from organisations in England are broadly in favour of it, while the briefings from organisations in Scotland are not.
[Deidre Brock]

In this, as in so much else, Scotland and England are different, and the differences cannot be easily reconciled. There was a time when Ministers in Whitehall acknowledged and accepted those differences and to an extent celebrated them as part of the diversity of the UK they sought to govern. Acknowledging that diversity and respecting its history could be achieved by respecting the devolved Administrations. There is no need for a power grab. There is no need for the centralisation of responsibility in Smith Square. Indeed, we know, and I am sure the Secretary of State will concede, that the plans being made for agriculture in England and the policies already being implemented would not suit Scotland; they will be harmful to Scottish food producers.

Douglas Ross (Moray) (Con): The hon. Lady speaks about briefings. Does she agree with the National Farmers Union Scotland, which said in its briefing that the Scottish National party Scottish Government should accept the offer from the Westminster Government to include a schedule for Scotland? Why is the SNP refusing to do that?

Deidre Brock: I note the selective quote from the hon. Gentleman. The NFUS also said that any such schedule should be one that comes from the Scottish Government. One could ask whether the DEFRA Secretary would be willing to accept Scottish Government amendments.

Bill Wiggin (North Herefordshire) (Con): On a point of order, Madam Deputy Speaker. It is very important that we hear from the SNP, because the Bill does pertain to Scotland. However, as the hon. Lady has just said, a large part of this area is devolved. Is it not then fair that the SNP abides, as we all have to, by the eight-minute limit, instead of taking twice that amount of time?

Madam Deputy Speaker (Dame Eleanor Laing): That agenda has vanished in the rush of blood that characterises the current Government’s planning for Brexit. Instead of respect for Scotland’s democracy and instead of upholding devolution, this Government are guilty of a centralisation of power the likes of which has not been seen in Europe for a lifetime. The political equivalent of an asset-stripping raid on the powers and responsibilities of Scotland’s Parliament and Scotland’s Government is breathtaking in its scope. Perhaps more breathtaking, however, is the truly outrageous determination of Ministers to pretend that there is nothing to see here, that nothing is being removed and that everything is being done for our own good.

The truth is that this is an assault on Scotland’s democracy that bears parallels to a previous Tory Government’s assault on Scotland’s industrial base. The ramifications of that assault are still being felt in Scotland and the ramifications of this one, if it is allowed to proceed, will hold Scotland back for decades to come. No decent Scottish MP could stand by and allow that to happen, no matter what party rosette they wear. No Scottish MP should be supporting a Bill that is part of that command-era-style centralisation. Every Scottish MP who wants to protect Scotland’s democracy, Scotland’s Parliament and the right of the Scottish people to choose their own Government will not be voting for the Bill today.

Deidre Brock: I am afraid that, unlike Welsh Labour Government Ministers, our Ministers are prepared to stand up for Scotland rather more forcefully. Ministers in the Scottish and Welsh Governments should be in full control of environmental, food and rural affairs policies, including agriculture. Let England be England; let Scotland be Scotland; and let Wales be Wales. There are fully functioning Administrations ready to take up the reins.

The Bill should be taken away and thought through again, so that there is something resembling sensible proposed legislation to be considered. We have a Bill that came prematurely: a lack of focus on the actual purpose of agriculture, a senseless and damaging power grab, the absence of any indication of a financial underpinning of Scottish agriculture and the protections that Scottish produce currently enjoys being stripped away. The Secretary of State is not a stupid man and he will know that the Bill is not fit for purpose. He has a leadership campaign to consider; no doubt, but legislation made here affects people who are trying to work, earn a living, get ahead and plan for the future. It should be done with care and a great deal of thought.

Finally, once upon a time, there was a Prime Minister called David Cameron, who started his term of office by visiting Edinburgh and then Cardiff to promote a respect agenda. He said that he wanted to make sure the UK was a partnership, not a dictatorship, and that he was determined to make devolution work. His Government, which contained many of the members of the current Government, promised to uphold the devolved powers to make sure that Scotland’s Parliament was properly respected. That agenda has vanished in the rush of blood that characterises the current Government’s planning for Brexit. Instead of respect for Scotland’s democracy and instead of upholding devolution, this Government are guilty of a centralisation of power the likes of which has not been seen in Europe for a lifetime. The political equivalent of an asset-stripping raid on the powers and responsibilities of Scotland’s Parliament and Scotland’s Government is breathtaking in its scope. Perhaps more breathtaking, however, is the truly outrageous determination of Ministers to pretend that there is nothing to see here, that nothing is being removed and that everything is being done for our own good.

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Mr Owen Paterson (North Shropshire) (Con): It is a pleasure to follow the hon. Member for Edinburgh North and Leith (Deidre Brock). I am glad she has finished. I draw the attention of the House to my entry in the Register of Members’ Financial Interests.

2.36 pm
This is a great day. We can debate the details of an agricultural policy for which we are responsible. We may not agree with the shadow Secretary's speech, but she made points that now have to be answered in this House. On day one in DEFRA, I was amazed to receive my brief and hear that we were being fined—called “disallowance” in Eurospeak—£630 million because the Commission did not like the cack-handed manner by which the previous Labour Government had gone from historic payments to area payments. That cannot now happen. The people now responsible, I am delighted to say, are sitting on the Government Front Bench. They have brought forward the Bill, which enables us to deliver what I think will be a real future for our farming industry and for our environment.

At DEFRA, I set four priorities: grow the rural economy, improve the environment, protect the country from animal disease and protect the country from plant disease. They can all be fulfilled within the Bill. The common agricultural policy had got itself completely stuck. Originally begun as a heavily subsidised production regime that produced vast amounts of food that could not be sold but had to be dumped on third markets with great export subsidies, it is morphing slowly into an all-encompassing environmental scheme for a continent where, as was pointed out to the Commission during the CAP negotiations, it is minus -45 in northern Sweden and plus +45 in Andalusia. It is impossible to have an all-encompassing regime for the continent. We have ended up with muddles such as the three-crop rule, which is deeply damaging to the mixed variety of farming in this country. We can now design a policy tailored to our own environment for each of our regions, as we touched on just now.

My first criticism is that it would be nice to have in the introduction a mention of food. Food and drink production is huge. It is worth £85 billion a year to the economy, supporting 3.5 million jobs and providing 62% of the food we eat. By the way, that is down from 78%. In 1978, we produced 78% of the food we eat. The CAP has failed even on self-sufficiency. It would be appropriate to have food in the title of the Bill, because that surely is the first role of farming.

What I would like to see—I am delighted no one has touched on it—is our leaving food production to farmers. I cite two countries from which we should take an example. New Zealand and Australia stopped all food subsidies. New Zealand used to have 70 million woolly ragedy things called sheep running around causing appalling environmental damage, including soil erosion and water pollution. In one year, I think 1983, 6 million tonnes of sheep had to be turned into fertiliser—it could not sell them. It now has zero subsidies for production and has improved its technology enormously. Today, there are about 27 million sheep, but it exports more lamb. That is an incredible achievement and that is the lesson for the Secretary of State: we should not subsidise food production. The New Zealanders have created whole new industries—with wine, and with venison. They hardly had any deer, but that industry is now worth a significant sum in exports for New Zealanders—about $100 million New Zealand dollars.

Those are the clear lessons. Where the Government can help, and there are opportunities in the Bill, is on technology. The Secretary of State came with me to Harper Adams University and we saw a prototype machine that will go along a row of strawberries in a polytunnel, leave the brown one because it is rotten, leave the green one for tomorrow and pick the big red one for one supermarket and the little red one for another, and pack it on the machine, avoiding all contact with human hands and swiftly delivering, healthy food to our consumers. The university would like help to get that prototype moving, and that is the sort of area where the Government have a direct opportunity to help.

Secondly on technology, the Secretary of State came with me to Soulton Hall and saw my young constituent Tim Ashton, who has gone for no till. He has managed to reduce costs in wheat production by 60%. In North Shropshire, just outside Wem, he can look Kansas, Australia or Argentina in the eye at world prices. He will make money at world prices. So long as we are not idiotic about glyphosate, with no till, there are the most amazingly beneficial environmental outcomes. Less water is going in the river and there is a huge increase in flora and fauna—so much so that he has stopped counting barn owls because there are just too many. On soil, having seen that, I would flag up to the Secretary of State that clause 1 really ought to list soil improvement as a public benefit to be sought. He has a pretty good list of public goods, but I would add soil and animal welfare, which is very important. I do not think that there is a single person in the House who would not like to see improved animal welfare standards. That is a clear public good that costs. We saw what happened when Lord Deben unilaterally improved our regime on tethers and stalls; there was a huge cost to our own industry and we ended up importing pork products from regimes that are less beneficial. But animal welfare is a public good; we would all support it; and there is room in this Bill to pay for that.

The other country that I would consider would be Switzerland. Do not subsidise food production—leave that to technology, to development and to individual farmers—but consider that livestock farming has an enormous environmental role. Tourism is worth about £30 billion in the rural economy. People will not go to the Derbyshire dales if there are no elders and willows and the stone walls have fallen down. They will not go to the Lake district; they will not go to Scotland; they will not go to north or mid-Wales. They will go there if there is a managed number of livestock maintaining the environment. That is the lesson from Switzerland. Very large numbers of sheep, cattle and calves are taken up to the highest Alps in the summer at vast expense—probably the most ludicrously uneconomic way to produce food in the world, but one with a massive environmental benefit, maintaining the landscape. That is the lesson on public goods, most of which are cited in clause 1.

Let us copy New Zealand and Australia on zero food subsidies and following technology, and copy Switzerland on significant payments—more than we get on the CAP in the moment—for the maintenance of the red marginal areas where one cannot survive at world food prices alone. Lastly, and very briefly, we are talking about public goods and if the farm is large and provides lots of public goods, I do not mind if it gets more public money. The Secretary of State is quite right to criticise the old basic payment in which people just got paid for having vast amounts of land and not delivering public
goods, but I think it is unfair to penalise large, efficient units if in future they are going to provide lots of public goods.

I congratulate the Secretary of State heartily. We will see a lot of detail in the statutory instruments, but the Bill broadly gives us a very good framework to copy New Zealand and Switzerland. With that, I look forward to voting for it tonight.

2.44 pm

Tim Farron (Westmorland and Lonsdale) (LD): This is a Bill that I hoped we would never have to discuss. No Russian cyber-attack could ever do as much damage to the UK as we are about to do to ourselves by leaving the world’s biggest market. The best deal we can get could only ever be second best to what we already have. However—and here I agree with the right hon. Member for North Shropshire (Mr Paterson)—if there was one aspect of leaving the European Union to which I could see a silver lining, it would be the ability for the United Kingdom to design and deliver its own policy for supporting agriculture, food security, and the productive and environmentally sustainable management of land.

Westmorland and Lonsdale is not just my home but the home of upland farming and one of our most spectacular natural assets—the lakes and the dales. After London, it is Britain’s biggest visitor destination and a vital centre of high-quality food production. How we support agriculture is of colossal importance to me and the communities that I am proud to represent.

The Bill aims to do a lot of good. The commitment to having public money for public goods is commendable and to be encouraged. Moving to enhance the already significant environmental benefits of agriculture is also right. But the detail is everything: the Bill has good potential, but it also contains the potential for some of the most disastrous unintended consequences if this House fails to act wisely and long-sightedly.

I welcome the Bill’s commitment to maintain our environmental and animal welfare standards in farming, but it makes no mention of standards for imported food from trade deals. If standards on imports are not guaranteed, our farmers will be at a competitive disadvantage. The Secretary of State must therefore ensure that all food imported into the United Kingdom is produced to at least equivalent standards on animal welfare, environmental protection and production quality.

When UNESCO granted world heritage site status to the Lake District last year, it did so in large part in recognition of the landscape management of our hill farmers. I am proud of them and I fear for them. Perhaps the biggest blind spot in this Bill is a failure to ensure that those who farm the uplands and other less favoured areas get a sustainable deal that will guarantee them a future and, crucially, draw new entrants into the industry.

The Federation of Cumbria Commoners has asked me to express its concerns about the Bill’s failure to provide an effective framework for Government to support its members. Their collective stewardship of common land has helped to create and conserve the landscape, wildlife and archaeology of the Lake district, the Pennines, the Howgill fells and the western dales.

Richard Benyon (Newbury) (Con): When I was a Minister at DEFRA, I was quite shocked by some people—even those who were quite senior in the local national park—who had an aggressive attitude towards precisely the kind of farmers that the hon. Gentleman is talking about. Rewilding has its place in certain areas, but a landscape that has been farmed and created by human beings since the time of the Norse people surely needs to be supported, not attacked, by those who have responsibility for it.

Tim Farron: I completely agree with the right hon. Gentleman. The importance of recognising that our landscape is as diverse as it is because it is managed and maintained is huge. He makes a very good point.

In my view, the Bill should state that traditional hill farming and commoning are a public good. This finely balanced system is at risk and will disappear without explicit public investment. When hill farmers have made changes to how they work to benefit the environment they should be rewarded for that too, but there must be a baseline payment, equivalent at least to the old hill farm allowance, so that they can have security and stability in the long term.

I want the Government to understand not just what farmers do but why they do it. Their chief motivation and purpose is to produce food. We think too little about food security: some 45% of the food we consume today is imported, whereas 20 years ago that figure was more like 35%. That is a very worrying trend. If UK farmers’ ability to compete is further undermined, that will only get worse.

If farmers got a fair price for their produce, there would be no need for direct payments and farmers would not want them. That is not the case—not even close. The food market is so warped by the power of supermarkets that removing direct payments to farmers could leave them entirely at the mercy of the forces of that skewed market, so the powers and scope of the Groceries Code Adjudicator must be vastly expanded to ensure an effective referee on this extremely uneven playing field.

I know it is not an either/or, but the Government should be strengthening the Groceries Code Adjudicator, not, as they propose to do in the Bill, strengthening the failing and discredited Rural Payments Agency. The Government’s proposal to phase out direct payments without a guarantee of an immediate and equivalent replacement is unwise and will not work, either for hill farmers or the country.

Dr Philippa Whitford (Central Ayrshire) (SNP): One issue regarding the fact that frameworks across the UK no longer need to be agreed but can be imposed is that less favoured area status makes up less than 20% in England, but more than 80% in Scotland and Wales and more than 70% in Northern Ireland. For people in those areas, direct payments are even more critical.

Tim Farron: Indeed, and we need to understand that the fact that this has been part of our payment landscape, and therefore our farming landscape, for the last 45 years has affected the actual landscape and our ability to produce affordable food, so it will have differential impacts across different parts of the United Kingdom.
John Redwood: Will the hon. Gentleman give way?

Tim Farron: I will make progress. If we combine that failure to recognise the impact of phasing out payments with the Bill’s failure to impose standards on imports, we do not see a very pretty picture for farmers or the communities in which they live. The unintended but utterly predictable consequence is that the Government will flood the market with cheap foreign imports and remove the lifeline of direct payments. Hundreds of farmers, especially hill farmers, will then go under. This is not a nice, gentle seven-year phase-out for hill farmers or those in less favoured areas; for many, it is a seven-year notice to quit the landscape altogether. When we can already meet only 55% of our food needs domestically, the last thing we need is a disastrous loss of capacity because of such a poorly thought-out and dramatic change.

If we remove direct payments for farmers without an immediate equivalent and tariffs are introduced on imports into this country, we will see a significant rise in the price of food on the shelves. The wealthiest people in this country spend 10% of their income on food, but the poorest spend 25%. Removing direct investment in farming will hit every family on a low or medium income in catastrophic and heartbreaking ways. It is shameful that we collectively preside over a society in which food bank usage is at its highest level ever. If we get the Bill wrong, the result will be greater poverty, greater need and greater misery for families who seek to get the Bill right, the result will be greater poverty, greater need and greater misery for families who seek to secure food security and stability of food supply as a public good. Food security does not need to come at the expense of caring for our land: there is no point in putting not just their aspirations, but their financial support behind this endeavour.

As other colleagues have mentioned, the Bill is very much a framework Bill, which provides the finances and the tools for us to transition out of the common agricultural policy and gives us the chance to have a dialogue in every relevant area. We can now design our own tailor-made solution so that the issue cannot be used as a political football down the road, and they are right. If the money—all £4 billion of it—our farmers and landowners have had to accept the system. Who would not? Who could blame them?

Dr Whitford: Does the hon. Lady recognise that the same issue exists within the United Kingdom, in that the land in Scotland, which makes up one third of the UK land mass, is utterly different from that being farmed on the south coast of England?

Rebecca Pow: The hon. Lady makes a good point, but the new Bill will allow us to tailor our approach to suit every part of the UK. Wales is taking this opportunity, and schedule 3 states clearly what it will do. Interestingly, we have not heard from Scotland yet.

John Lamont (Berwickshire, Roxburgh and Selkirk) (Con): The real risk to Scottish farmers is the fact that the SNP Scottish Government have failed to opt in to this Bill and failed to introduce a Bill in the Scottish Parliament to allow Scottish farmers to get the support they will desperately need after Brexit. Does my hon. Friend agree that it is the SNP who are letting Scottish farmers down?

Rebecca Pow: Our Scottish Conservative colleagues provide strong representation for farmers. Farming is very important to Scotland, which is a rural area. The SNP and the Scottish Parliament have really missed an opportunity to get their details down on paper so that they can play a full role in the really exciting future that this Government are creating. If it were not for the Conservative Government and our coming out of Europe—I say this even though I was a remain— we would not have this great opportunity.
Crucially, the essence of the Bill is to move away from making payments simply for the privilege of owning land, as has been mentioned, and towards the concept of paying for public goods. That is the cornerstone of the Bill, and it is absolutely the right thing to do. The basic idea of receiving money for doing something for the public good has met with universal approval, not just from farmers but from environmentalists and right across the board with everybody I have met in Taunton Deane so far. That is true of improving the quality of our water—currently, only 14% of our rivers are classed as clean, which is absolutely shocking; planting more trees to help to reduce the speed of run-off from the hills to the Somerset levels, which will help to reduce the terrible flooding that we have had over many years; and creating new habitats to improve biodiversity and reverse the catastrophic declines in plant and animal populations that we have witnessed in our own lifetimes, as the 2016 “State of Nature” report clearly sets out.

In many cases, EU agricultural policy has been the driver for those wildlife declines, with the loss of mixed farming—grass is so important to that, as it was on the farm where I grew up—less rotation, fewer hedgerows and increased pesticide use. The increased use of pesticides has reduced the quantity of plants on which foraging insects rely; indeed, we rely on those insects to pollinate our crops. The Bill offers an opportunity for new schemes that emphasise the protection of biodiversity and help to redress those losses. Habitat creation schemes such as the one run on West Sedgemoor by the RSPB, which is producing tasty beef, creating summer water meadows and bringing back the snipe—I am proud to be the RSPB snipe champion—are really working. The Bill offers the opportunity to build on such schemes, which I welcome.

There is, however, one thing that I must ask the Minister. If farmers and environmental groups are already involved in environmental stewardship schemes, will those schemes still operate following the implementation of the Bill? Will they be allowed to run their course, or will they end with those groups then having to apply for new schemes?

The Minister will not be at all surprised to learn that I am now going to mention soil, because I have bent his ear on the subject many times. Half the soils in the east of the country are likely to become unproductive within a decade. That was highlighted in our Environmental Audit Committee report—and I see that the Committee’s Chairperson, the hon. Member for Wakefield (Mary Creagh), is in the Chamber. Soil erosion is a very serious issue, as is the fact that soil has been treated as a growing medium rather than a living habitat for far too long. I therefore welcome the priority that the Bill gives to soil health, and I was pleased that the Minister came to the launch of the Sustainable Soil Alliance in the House. I hope that the work that it is doing to advise on how we could monitor soil erosion or set targets to address it might influence the way in which payments are made.

Mary Creagh (Wakefield) (Lab): The hon. Lady is a true soil evangelist, but the Government have already signed up to a target in the Paris agreement to increase soil carbon content by four parts per 1,000 every year in order to sequester more carbon into our soil. Does the hon. Lady agree that that is a public good that should be funded and subsidised through the Bill?

Rebecca Pow: The hon. Lady raises an important point. As she knows, I am passionate about this issue. We need to have a conversation about all our climate change targets, including the potential net zero target that some people are talking about. The question of targets is very important: how can we pay unless we know what we are paying for? The targets that we set for the climate change commitments have worked well, and a similar model might chime with the 25-year plan and the forthcoming environment Act. I believe that many of the details will go into that Bill rather than this framework Agriculture Bill.

Payments relating to our natural heritage and culture are very welcome. My constituency contains two areas of natural beauty where people are pleading that landscape, and landscape beauty, be included in the Bill.

The Government’s commitment to funding until 2022 and for the transition period demonstrates our ongoing support for the countryside. That is obviously important, given that two thirds of farm incomes in the south-west are currently derived from basic payments. I know the Minister understands that. However, I would like to see a further commitment to future funding. God forbid that we ever change Government, but the production of beef or horticultural crops cannot be switched on like a light bulb, and farmers would like some long-term commitment.

Although the Bill does not directly list food as a public good, it does much to enable the efficient production of food. My local farmers welcome the data-gathering elements in the Bill, although, for the purpose of transparency, they would like supermarkets to be included, as well as the manufacturers and producers along the line—not just the raw-material producers. However, I welcome the data collection, and I stand by the Secretary of State’s commitment to maintaining our high food standards. That is crucial to the future. I look forward to the creation of an overarching environmental standards body—in, I believe, the environment Bill—which will hold people to account.

Let me say penultimately that, much as we love our Welsh farming colleagues—indeed, many of them come to Somerset to trade at our markets, especially Sedgemoor market, and they are very welcome—no one wants an internal competitive market to develop as a result of the flexibility offered to Welsh farmers. I am sure the Minister understands what I mean by that.

In conclusion—and thank you very much, Madam Deputy Speaker, for allowing me to speak—let me say that the Bill heralds the most significant change in our land use for decades, with the finances to underpin it. It is the Conservatives who are leading the way in that regard, for farming and for the environment. I am confident that issues relating to the environment, farming and even everything to do with our rural communities will dovetail in the Bill. It is absolutely the right way forward for a sustainable and healthy future. Not one of those elements can survive without the others, and on that note, I give the Bill, and all those who have worked so hard on it, my full support.

Several hon. Members rose—
Madam Deputy Speaker (Dame Eleanor Laing): Order. After the next speech, the time limit will be reduced to seven minutes, but that does not apply to Mr David Simpson.

3.5 pm

David Simpson (Upper Bann) (DUP): Now we come to the easiest part of the United Kingdom to resolve when it comes to agri-food. I dare not tread into the issue of Brexit. Reference was made earlier to a red line in the Irish Sea, but I assure Members that that will never happen as far as the Democratic Unionist party is concerned. We are part of the United Kingdom, and that is how it will remain.

I refer the House to my entry in the Register of Members’ Financial Interests. I have been involved in the agri-food sector for about 43 years—I know that that is hard to believe—from working as a primary producer to working in retail and production and processing.

I think that we are about to experience dramatic changes throughout the industry. These are exciting times. When I speak to farmers and industry representatives, they acknowledge that. They know that there will probably be some trying times, but they are excited by the opportunities that we will have after we have left the European Union.

I welcome the opportunity to debate a Bill that will have an impact on every farmer and farm business throughout the United Kingdom, whether it keeps sheep on the Antrim hills or grows wheat in East Anglia. Given that the UK is leaving the EU and the common agricultural policy is introduced, I welcome the regional flexibilities that are proposed for the different regions of the UK. I believe that there should be a variation in the new policy for each of those regions, provided that those variations do not produce competition in the internal market.

I note the name of the Bill, and I hope that agriculture will remain the central theme in any future policy. The Prime Minister is on record as saying—that on three occasions, I think—when I put questions to her that agriculture would not be a poor cousin or the sacrificial lamb in any negotiations with Europe. We will hold the Prime Minister’s feet to the fire, along with those of the Secretary of State and the farming Minister. Agriculture must remain at the top of the agenda.

In Northern Ireland, we employ some 120,000 or 125,000 people in the agri-food sector. There is huge concern in the industry, and of course in the farming community, about EU casual workers. We need to address that during the Bill’s Committee stage, or perhaps it can be dealt with by the Environment, Food and Rural Affairs Committee. There is a massive shortage of workers in the agri-food sector. A few weeks ago, along with the Chairman of the Committee, I met representatives of the industry, who emphasised that they were reaching crisis point, because the sector did not have enough workers to deal with production. The Government need to deal with that issue.

Food production that involves sustainable but profitable farming is essential. As has already been mentioned, those who are in the black at the bank can do many things. Given the changes that are coming, we must encourage farm production. It has already been mentioned that the Bill needs to give more emphasis to the incentive for farmers to grow and produce food. The incentive is there, but it needs to be made clearer that farmers will be encouraged to produce good food.

In Northern Ireland we have for many years had the Albert Heijn supermarkets in Holland insisting on coming to buy their meat in Northern Ireland because of how it is reared and because husbandry and animal welfare is maintained. That applies right across the whole of the United Kingdom. Across the whole UK, we produce the best food produce to be found anywhere in the European Union. That is a fact, and our standards and our animal welfare must be maintained. It is vital that we do that.

I have talked about opportunities. I believe there are opportunities, but the Government must take the issue of the workforce in the agri-food sector more seriously. Some companies in Northern Ireland are 60% dependent on people from other countries. We must get that situation right in some shape or form, and hopefully we will resolve it.

I want the Bill to allow for a UK-wide approach on matters that affect the whole UK. My party believes there should be an overarching policy across the UK to deal with such issues as marketing standards and crisis fund management. It is important that we do such things collectively.

Ultimately, the effectiveness of this Bill will depend on the trade policy that is implemented. Let us be clear: trade legislation or a Pacific trade deal that views agriculture as a sacrificial lamb for the importation of lower quality and standards than those in UK production will not be accepted. The British public will not accept that. We have a standard and a reputation not just across the whole European Union, but further afield, such as in South Africa and in those other countries that buy our chicken product because we cannot market it anywhere else. Our standard must be maintained. I am sure the farming Minister is aware of that—he has been told about it often enough when he has given evidence to the EFRA Committee.

Mary Creagh: As the granddaughter of a Fermanagh cattle farmer, I agree with the hon. Gentleman wholeheartedly about the fantastic standards and great tradition of farming in Northern Ireland. Does he agree that it is imperative for the future of farming and agriculture across the UK that the Government avoid a no-deal Brexit, which would put World Trade Organisation tariffs of 30% on our lamb and beef and drive most of the beef and cattle and lamb producers in this country out of business? That must be avoided at all costs.

David Simpson: I thank the hon. Lady for her intervention, but the Prime Minister has said that we have to get the right deal—that is important. I do not think that anyone here wants to go towards WTO, but we must get the right deal. I spoke to the lamb industry a few weeks ago, and, if we go to WTO for that industry—the Minister will know this because he has been told often enough—and tariffs of 14% or 15% are introduced, that would decimate the Northern Ireland lamb industry overnight, given that we export 90% of our lamb. Having said that, we need to get the right deal. Unfortunately, however, the EU keeps sticking in
its heels at present, which is nonsense, especially in
terms of the border of Northern Ireland, the movement
of cattle and so forth, free trade within Northern Ireland,
and the soft or hard border. That is all nonsense,
because the situation will remain as it is and has been
for many years. There is no reason to change that. No
one wants to see us going towards WTO, but we must
get the right deal. If the right deal is not there, we will
have major problems with our industry and employment,
and the sector will be decimated. We therefore have to
get the right deal and I know the Minister is well aware
of that.

3.14 pm  

Chris Davies (Brecon and Radnorshire) (Con): It is a
pleasure to follow the hon. Member for Upper Bann
(David Simpson), and it is always a great pleasure to
hear his wise and knowledgeable words in any agricultural
debate in this House. I congratulate the Secretary of
State and his ministerial team on bringing forward this
Bill and delivering the principle of support for agriculture
in this House for the first time in over 40 years.

Many aspects of the CAP were of course very unpopular,
but it did provide a vital lifeline for farm businesses and
farming families in my constituency and many upland
constituencies right across the country. However, change
needs to come, and thank goodness the Government
have worked long and hard on this and change is going
in the right direction.

We need to reduce the administrative burden on
farmers. This is a very overburdened industry, and we
have a great opportunity to reduce the burden. I know
the Minister in particular is keen to see this happen and
has great ideas that will come forward in future statutory
instruments.

We must also think about how the payments are
going to be made. Many of my constituents are concerned
about the Rural Payments Agency, as in the past it has
not exactly covered itself in glory. If it is to be in charge
of our new scheme, there must be tighter control, and
greater regulation must be placed on it by DEFRA. I
hope Ministers will take that request back to the
Department with them.

I am pleased that the Welsh Government have decided
to couple themselves with the Bill and the British
Government, and I am very disappointed that the Scottish
Government are not following suit. That is a massive
disappointment to the people of Scotland, and the hon.
Member for Gordon (Colin Clark), who serves as my
vice-chair on the Back-Bench DEFRA committee, works
particularly hard for farmers in Scotland, as do all the
other Scottish Conservative Members, so I am very
disappointed at what we have heard from the Scottish
National Benches today.

Dr Whitford: If the hon. Gentleman would bother to
consult the NFU Scotland, he would find that its primary
concern is of farming being run from here in Westminster,
not only with a centralising agenda but by a Parliament
that took £160 million of EU money from Scottish
farmers. [Interruption]

Chris Davies: I do not agree with the hon. Lady and it
is clear that other Conservative Members also disagree.

Stephen Kerr (Stirling) (Con): In fact the briefing
states very clearly that the biggest concern that the
NFUS has is the politicisation of the process by the
SNP, which is governing Scotland not in the national
interest but in the nationalist interest.

Chris Davies: I would go further: I would be interested
to know if DEFRA would consider ring-fencing the
agricultural budget to all devolved nations as time goes
on, because certainly in Wales we are concerned that the
money will not be spent on agriculture. We hope that
Scotland will spend its money on agriculture, but time
will tell.

Importantly, the NFU right around the country is
keen to see a national framework. All the countries in
the UK need to work under a national framework;
otherwise, farming will become fragmented, with Scottish
farmers competing against Welsh farmers and English
against Northern Irish and so on, which will be to the
detriment of the whole farming industry in the UK. It is
therefore important that we have a national framework.

Liz Saville Roberts (Dwyfor Meirionnydd) (PC): Does
the hon. Gentleman not share my concern that DEFRA
here in London has been listening to, and had the ear of,
English farming lobbyists for the last 19 years? That
raises the question of how the Government will best
represent the interests of farming in Wales and Scotland.

Chris Davies: I do not share the hon. Lady’s concern.
My constituency lies on the border, and there are of
course border farmers between Scotland and England
as well as between Wales and England, and we are
concerned that we might see different processes taking
place on either side of the border, causing great problems
for cross-border farmers. I am afraid the hon. Lady, the
leader of Plaid Cymru in Westminster, does not share
that concern with Welsh farmers on the Welsh side of
the border.

Farmers are also conservationists. They have a dual
role; there is no difference—there is no difference at all.
The Secretary of State visited a farm in my constituency
just before the summer recess, and met farmers there—
family farmers and Young Farmers’ Club members.

The Painscastle valley is a typical farming valley in
Wales. It has a river at the bottom and well fenced and
hedged green fields leading up to the commons above.
This was not designed by a young civil servant with
an environmental degree sitting in Westminster, Cardiff
or Scotland, or by a bearded, sandal-wearing lifetime
environmental campaigner, or even by a fashionable
environmentalist who writes a blog and has thousands
of Twitter followers. That scene, that valley and that
countryside were designed and managed by generations
of farmers over 300 years and more. Farmers really are
the best people to take the environment and farming
forward, and livestock farmers should be right to the
fore in this brave new world of farming. They should be
looking after our payments, guiding our policies and
ensuring that they are there to provide the true knowledge
of agriculture.

As the chair of the all-party parliamentary group on
forestry, I should like to touch briefly on the subject of
forestry. It has not been touched on a great deal in the
debate so far. The Bill focuses on agriculture, as has my
speech so far, but it is important to consider tree planting
in this country. Brecon and Radnorshire is a large constituency in which forestry and timber production support many rural livelihoods. We have the largest sawmill in Wales, based in Newbridge-on-Wye and employing nearly 200 people. It is important that we support tree planting, and I was delighted to hear the Secretary of State giving a firm commitment during our conference a week or so ago to planting 11 million trees during this Parliament. I hope that he will be able to achieve that aim, because it is vital to maintain the timber processing industry, whether for flood prevention and mitigation or purely for products for the future, to enable it to thrive and prosper.

Sir Hugo Swire: Does my hon. Friend agree that it is intensely regrettable that the current Mayor of London has not continued to plant as many trees in London as his predecessors did?

Chris Davies: I fully agree with my right hon. Friend. It is important that we plant trees in this country, wherever they might be: in the countryside, in the streets or in the middle of dual carriageways. The public want that to happen, and I hope that DEFRA will ensure that it does.

We might not all be farmers or foresters, and we might not all be cheese makers or honey producers, but whatever we do and wherever we reside, it is important that we live in a clean and healthy environment. And of course, we all need to eat. Unlike some Members who might sit on the Opposition Front Bench, we cannot all live on avocados from Mexico or mung beans from India. We need to feed ourselves on great British products, and it is important that we support our farming industry. We clearly produce the best products in the world, including livestock in the form of beef and sheep, and fruit and vegetables. Here in Britain, we have the best welfare standards in the world and our products are of the best quality. Through this Agriculture Bill, we need to support that and support our farmers.

3.22 pm

Kerry McCarthy (Bristol East) (Lab): No matter what our views on Brexit are, there is near-universal consensus that the common agricultural policy is in dire need of reform. I want a farming system that is both economically viable and environmentally sustainable, with the highest possible animal welfare standards. I chair the all-party parliamentary group on agro-ecology for sustainable food and farming, and we have long called for more support for organic farming, agroforestry, pasture-based livestock systems, integrated pest management and low-input mixed farming—mixed farming is very important—as well as for a move away from unsustainable intensification and an over-reliance on agrochemicals and cheap fossil fuels.

We want to see whole-farm systems that support nature-friendly farming. I believe that the Bill, with its emphasis on public money for public goods, could provide an ideal opportunity to support that sort of farming, through rewarding farmers for what they do as custodians of the land for future generations, and not simply on the basis of how much land they own. Public money should be used not to subsidise market failure but to reward behaviour, which the market does not do. That means farming in a way that addresses the serious environmental challenges facing us, such as biodiversity loss, habitat destruction, disappearing pollinators, soil degradation, polluted rivers, water run-off and much more. It is vital that we get this right.

There are fundamental weaknesses in the Bill, however, including the uncertainty around funding beyond 2022, the emphasis on powers rather than duties, and the absence of any information on how the money will be split between productivity payments and environmental payments. The Bill needs to set a multiannual budgetary framework under clause 33 to provide more certainty for farmers. I would endorse Greener UK’s recommendation for a duty on Ministers to introduce an environmental land management scheme by a set date, and its call for targets and benchmarks for public goods. We also need clarity that the public goods listed in clause 1 are the priority for funding, and that any payments for productivity must contribute to their delivery.

I am concerned that there is no regulatory baseline in the Bill. The Minister will no doubt tell us that this will be determined by Dame Glenys Stacey’s review, which is due to report by the end of December, and that it might then be included in the environment Bill, but that would be the wrong place for it. Cross-compliance is a fundamental part of the common agricultural policy. It underpins taxpayer investment, and this Bill is setting out a replacement for the CAP. Can the Minister therefore assure us that the Government will introduce amendments to this legislation, most likely by the time it is in the other place, on the basis of Dame Glenys Stacey’s review?

It is also time that we looked far more seriously at reducing farming’s carbon footprint. This has already been mentioned, and all I will say at this point is that I would like to see a goal in the Bill for agricultural emissions to reach net zero by 2050, in line with the Paris agreement. That is absolutely necessary following Monday’s report from the Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change.

The Bill is also missing an opportunity to link farm payments to public health goals. It is predicted that diet-related ill health will overtake smoking as the biggest cause of preventable death before too long. We spend more on the treatment of obesity and diabetes than we spend on the police, the fire service and the judicial system combined. I am quite excited by what I have heard so far about DEFRA’s future food strategy. It sounds promising, but we need to see measures in the Bill to increase the availability, affordability and accessibility of healthy food, including UK-grown fruit, vegetables and pulses. Also, as the Chair of the Health Committee said, we urgently need to act to address the public health crisis of growing antimicrobial resistance, and the associated rise in superbugs, by eliminating the overuse of antibiotics in farming and rewarding good animal husbandry. As I said to the Secretary of State earlier, I will be keen to hear where the bar for animal welfare will be set when it is defined in 2020. At the moment, we are too complacent about animal welfare standards in this country, and I would like to see far more ambitious targets and a more ambitious definition.

There have been calls to amend the Bill to include food production as a public good—this is basically about maintaining direct payments under another name—but we are talking about a limited pot of public money. Food production is ultimately rewarded by the market,
or it certainly should be. We need to ensure that the market is fair and that farmers get what the president of the Country Land and Business Association, Tim Breitmeyer, describes as “a fairer share of the food pound”, along with the security that comes from a longer-term funding settlement.

The Government clearly accept, with the new fair dealing measures in the Bill, that they were wrong not to extend the remit of the Groceries Code Adjudicator to cover indirect suppliers, but they need to go further to ensure the fair treatment of all those who produce our food, along the whole supply chain. I have just been told that I have a Back-Bench business debate next Thursday on ending modern slavery, human rights abuses and the exploitation of workers in the supermarket food supply chain, and I urge as many Members as possible to come along to support it. Cheap food in our supermarkets often comes at the cost of worker exploitation. The fair dealing measures in clause 25 must apply to all sectors and to all stages of the supply chain. I gather that dairy will be the priority because the existing voluntary code of practice is not deemed to have worked well, but fruit and veg farmers need protection, too.

The Bill alone will not be enough to safeguard farming in this country. The real battle and the real danger come from the global Britain Brexiteers and their enthusiasm for cheap food imports and the scrapping of standards post-Brexit. The US Secretary of Commerce, Wilbur Ross, made it clear that any post-Brexit trade deal will hinge on the UK ditching its higher, EU-derived food safety laws, which currently prohibit chlorinated chicken, hormone-pumped beef, ractopamine growth promoters in pork and much more. The implications of that would be huge for UK food and farming. It would drive out higher-welfare and smaller-scale UK farmers, who would be unable to compete on price, and make it more difficult for us to export to the EU.

There are also food safety issues. One in seven people in the US contracts a food-borne illness every year, compared with just over one in 70 in the UK, which must have something to do with US food production system standards. The Secretary of State has repeatedly said he has no intention of reducing standards, and I think he is entirely sincere, but I am not convinced that all his colleagues agree. We often hear them say that there will be no drop in British standards, but that does not mean that goods produced to a lower standard in other countries will not make it into this country under a trade deal, and I want reassurance about that. Without such a commitment, even the most generous and sensitively structured support that emerges from the legislation could be fatally undermined.

3.30 pm

Julian Sturdy (York Outer) (Con): I start by drawing the House’s attention to my entry in the Register of Members’ Financial Interests. This is a historic moment for British agriculture, and I warmly welcome certainty and clarity for the sector regarding the shape of future agreements that the Bill provides. Certainty is as vital for agriculture as it is for any other business sector. That is highlighted by the proposals for a seven-year transition period, beginning in 2021, between CAP and the new policy, which will provide farmers with much-needed time to refashion their business models and plan for the future. The transition period is longer than predicted, which must be welcomed, and demonstrates the Government’s commitment to the progressive evolution of the sector rather than the cliff-edge revolution that was once discussed.

I also welcome the phasing out and delinking of basic payments, including lump-sum payments, to assist farmers in diversification or exiting the market, including through funding retirement, thereby supporting new entrants to the sector. Proposals to encourage new blood into agriculture should be promoted enthusiastically.

Mary Creagh: While we may welcome payments that enable farmers to exit farming, does the hon. Gentleman agree that there should be protections for the taxpayer in the statutory instruments that flow from this Bill? We cannot have a farmer taking seven years’ payments up front to retire and then signing the farm over to his son or daughter the next day, thereby double claiming on the same land for the next seven years.

Julian Sturdy: I accept that fair point, but my reading is that land belonging to those who take their retirement money up front and leave the sector—land that we hope would go to a new entrant—would not be entitled to any payments. However, the devil will be in the detail.

Huw Merriman (Bexhill and Battle) (Con): Does my hon. Friend share my concern that financiers from the City, rather than new entrants, may purchase that land? That is an issue that I see in East Sussex, where the possibility is that we may lose farming altogether.

Julian Sturdy: My hon. Friend makes a good point, but is that not more about our tax system than this Agriculture Bill? Perhaps that is something to consider going forward.

As chair of the all-party parliamentary group on science and technology in agriculture, I support the principle of shifting state funding for the sector towards supporting innovation and productivity gains, alongside public money for public goods. Leading technologies of the fourth industrial revolution, such as robotics, data science, autonomous vehicles and biotechnology, have the potential to transform agriculture, so it is wise to concentrate support on facilitating the growth and efficiency gains of tomorrow. To that end, a commitment from Ministers to a certain level of funding for productivity and innovation after the “same cash total to 2022” guarantee expires would be most useful in this area.

I note that, as some Members have already said, soil health is not specifically mentioned in the text of the Bill as a public good that deserves financial assistance. There are, though, very encouraging references to it in the Department’s policy statement; that is important given the importance of soil for flood prevention, for the preservation of fertility and for productivity for future generations. I hope that Ministers can give greater prominence to soil health as the Bill progresses.

I broadly support the transition to a system of public money for public goods, but I urge the Government not to lose sight of the fact that the main activity of most farmers will and should remain the production of food.
Moreover, food production and environmental stewardship are already two sides of the same coin, as several Members have said. A resilient and profitable agricultural sector is nature's best friend. If we remember that, we can have a good environmental policy.

The supposedly natural landscapes and countryside of today have been shaped by centuries of agriculture, from the clearing of the forests that once covered virtually all our islands to the first planting of cereals. Policy making in this subject area will therefore benefit from the constant understanding that farming is not some imposition on or extraction from the country, but a positive evolutionary force that has shaped the green and pleasant land that we all seek to protect.

I am glad to see that food security is covered in DEFRA’s accompanying policy statement, but it is not specifically mentioned in the Bill. The National Farmers Union recently estimated that if the UK tried to live solely off locally produced food for a whole year, starting in January, we would run out by 6 August. Global population growth means that humanity will have to produce sustainably 70% more food by 2050. That represents 1 billion more tonnes of rice, wheat or other cereals alone. Such figures illustrate the question to which any comprehensive farming and environmental policy will have to stand up. I know that Ministers are deeply aware of this policy aspect, but it would be reassuring to hear further detail on the Government’s vision for food security as it relates to domestic food production.

The Government need to make sure that the move towards supporting public goods does not have unintended negative consequences. I have spoken to the Minister about this issue in the past. The classic example of the unintended consequences of the CAP is the renowned three-crop rule. Although it might have been put in place for the right environmental reasons, it has had huge negative impacts, certainly throughout the UK. The Secretary of State rightly emphasised that the CAP currently incentivises farmers to put every possible acre into food production, so less public funding is available for natural capital assets such as wetlands and forests. Equally, I am sure that he does not want to see a situation in which policy incentivises farmers to take as many acres as possible out of food production, or to cease farming altogether, lay off workers and just collect payments for managing land to provide public goods. Balance is needed, and we have to find that balance for the policy and in the Bill.

Similarly, in designing the policy, Ministers must take care to ensure that funding for the sector is not substantially transferred to people who just own land and are not actually farmers. That might best be done by putting in place clear commitments on future funding to support innovation and productivity increases on farms.

I applaud the measures in the Bill that will allow the Secretary of State to introduce regulations to ensure fair dealing with agricultural producers and to facilitate that through the collection of data, which is mentioned in the Bill a lot. It is important that Ministers make clear as soon as possible how they intend to use the powers and how they can be made as comprehensive and effective as possible, with real teeth, ultimately. There are many positive aspects to the Bill that I support, but the devil will always be in the detail, and that is what I will scrutinise as the Bill progresses through Parliament.

Several hon. Members rose—

Mr Deputy Speaker (Sir Lindsay Hoyle): Order. Many Members want to speak, so can we try to shave some time off speeches? If Members do not do that, I will have to take the limit down, or we will not get everybody in. I call Pete Wishart.

3.40 pm

Pete Wishart (Perth and North Perthshire) (SNP): I am grateful to you for calling me so early in the debate. Mr Deputy Speaker. MP4 will forever be grateful to you for enabling us to go and make the video we are supposed to be doing today.

Let me say to the hon. Member for North Herefordshire (Bill Wiggin) that it might be a bit tiresome to hear another Member from the Scottish National party speak, but we have every right to speak in this Parliament. We will make our points and continue to do so.

Of all the matters we need to consider in the fallout from Brexit, our agricultural policy and the needs of our rural economy are probably the most acute, with farming the sector hardest hit by the no deal, hard deal Brexit. Probably for the first time since the war, we are faced with searching questions about the nation’s food security. We know that astronomical tariffs might be placed on British agricultural products, driving many farmers out of business and leading to an almost unprecedented reinvention of rural Britain. Agricultural goods are perishable, yet they could be sitting in a giant car park in south-east England, waiting to get to market. Those are the type of issues we will be facing, but in the face of the incoming storm, we have this Agriculture Bill—this modest Government response to a Brexit that could decimate the productivity of our agriculture and our countryside. It is an Agriculture Bill without agriculture; a Bill for farming that pays scant regard to food production; a sort of “let them eat environmental strategies” approach; an aspirational land management Bill for a countryside that does not really exist and probably never will come to be.

The vision in the Bill is of a countryside that is better managed for the environment, but not as a location for thriving small businesses providing the healthy, diverse foods we need. We are asked to believe that the Government’s newfound enthusiasm for greening is real—a Government who would probably prefer to frack the countryside than farm it. Many farmers in my constituency take great exception to the suggestion implicit in the Bill that they are doing nothing to improve the environment and their land. Every day, they are doing everything to manage the land for the benefit of us all, and the suggestion that they need incentives to do that is doubly insulting. The hon. Member for Westmorland and Lonsdale (Tim Farron) made a good point: this is a seven-year phasing out of direct payments to farmers. For many of them, it will be nothing more other than an opportunity to quit farming once and for all.

The UK Government kindly invited the Scottish Government to be covered by the Bill’s provisions. My colleagues in Edinburgh, quite rightly, have declined. Scotland has a very different rural economy from that in the rest of the United Kingdom, requiring an altogether different approach. As has been said a couple of times now, some 80% of the land in Scotland is made up of...
less favoured areas. We depend more on support. Our food and drinks sector depends on excellence, and in particular on protected geographical indication status, which is threatened by Brexit.

I have in my constituency half the berry farmers in Scotland. There is nothing in the Bill about immigration. Apparently, we have a pilot seasonal workers scheme, which will provide 2,500 workers—2,500 workers, when in a response to a written question from me, DEFRA said 64,500 workers were required. What are we supposed to do with 2,500—one or two per farm? Is that the Minister’s plan to try to save the many berry farms in my constituency? Agriculture is fully devolved to Scotland, and we will not compromise on anything that threatens our Government’s ability to serve Scottish farming.

Several hon. Members rose—

Pete Wishart: I will give way to the hon. Member for Dumfries and Galloway (Mr Jack), as I have not heard from him for a while.

Mr Alister Jack (Dumfries and Galloway) (Con): The hon. Gentleman speaks in apocalyptic tones. Can he explain why the Scottish Government do not have a schedule to the Bill? Their refusal of any offers from the UK Government will leave us in a position where, in 2020, Scottish farmers will have no mechanism to enable them to receive their support payments.

Pete Wishart: I am grateful to the hon. Gentleman, because I was just coming on to that. I thought that he would perhaps lead me on to the key of this agenda—and the objections and screams from the Scottish Conservatives. We will not agree to a schedule to this Bill for as long as this Parliament and this Government fail to respect the devolution settlement and indulge in this grotesque grab of powers that should rightly belong in the Scottish Parliament. That is what has happened. As long as it continues to happen, and as long as the Secretary of State refuses to respect devolution, there will not be a legislative consent motion from the Scottish Parliament. We are happy to have common frameworks across the United Kingdom, as we have said again and again, but they have to be agreed and negotiated; they cannot be imposed. As long as he continues to approach devolution as something that he can control and manipulate, this is not going to happen. The sooner he gets beyond that mindset, the better things will be.

The key dispute, where I ask the Secretary of State to respond, is about the World Trade Organisation regulations in the Bill. In his view, everything to do with the WTO is reserved. Does he not accept that the administration of WTO terms is a matter for the Scottish Parliament? We do not have to take the Scottish Government’s word for that, because in a piece of very useful legal advice from NFU Scotland yesterday we learned that it is indeed the case. The advice says that “Scottish Ministers will not have total freedom to apply domestic support as they see fit if the Secretary of State makes regulations setting limits in relation to WTO classifications.” It also says that “it would not be a legitimate use of regulation-making power to prescribe within the limits how Scottish Ministers would be able to exercise the powers to apply support.”

NFU Scotland agrees with us that WTO rules administration is a matter for the Scottish Parliament.

Kirstene Hair (Angus) (Con): How many farmers did the hon. Gentleman speak to in his constituency prior to writing his speech? As he knows, my constituency borders his, and farmers in Angus are calling out for clarity from the SNP Government in Edinburgh. They want them to put the national interest before the nationalist interest. They want to ensure that farming has a prosperous future. They want to ensure that the SNP puts its country before party. Can he tell me when—

Mr Deputy Speaker (Sir Lindsay Hoyle): Order. I must say to hon. Members that interventions are meant to be short, not speeches. I am very concerned about the number of Members who wish to get in. I am going to drop the time limit after this to six minutes, but Members should not be surprised if shortly after I have to drop it again.

Pete Wishart: I am sincerely grateful to the hon. Lady because the other key point we have been hearing from Conservative Members today is that, apparently, there is no plan or policy from the Scottish Government. Of course we will have a Government Bill. But let me tell Conservative Members that this Bill presented by the Secretary of State is nothing other than an aspirational wish list. What we are doing is consulting with the sector. We will be hearing from our rural champions. Once we have heard back, a clear agricultural policy Bill will be secured to ensure that Scottish agricultural interests are properly looked after—it will not be this aspirational nonsense that we are hearing from this Government. We need an agricultural approach that acknowledges the full horror of a hard deal Brexit and the absolute disaster of a no deal if it comes along.

The Scottish Government’s “Stability and Simplicity” paper sets out a detailed five-year plan to minimise the potential disruption of this Tory Brexit to our rural communities. Our plan will give farmers and crofters stability during a period of unprecedented change not of Scotland’s making. We have always to remember that Scotland wanted nothing to do with this disastrous Brexit policy, and it is up to us to try to clear up this mess to ensure that our farmers are properly protected and that they will be able to do their business. When that consultation is concluded, the Scottish Government will set out their plans, taking into account recommendations from our own agricultural champions and the National Council of Rural Advisers. That is how to frame legislation: speak to the sector involved, ask it what it wants and what it would like to see in the Bill, and then legislate.

Michael Gove: Can the hon. Gentleman explain why there are more Scottish Conservative MPs in this debate than Scottish nationalist MPs?

Pete Wishart: I will just finish my point given that it is about the Secretary of State, and then, if I have time, I will respond to the question.
I particularly enjoyed the Secretary of State’s histrionics when challenged on convergence funding. I have never seen him so rattled. The question back to him is this: when will he do the right thing by Scottish farmers and give back the money that is due to them as soon as possible?

**Bill Wiggin**: On a point of order, Mr Deputy Speaker. I believe that the hon. Member for Perth and North Perthshire (Pete Wishart) inadvertently misled the House. He can look at the record and see that I definitely said that the SNP should be heard, and to say otherwise is obviously wrong. I hope that he will check that and put what he said right.

**Mr Deputy Speaker (Sir Lindsay Hoyle)**: It is open to any Member to check. Let us crash on now. David Warburton has six minutes.

3.50 pm

**David Warburton** (Somerton and Frome) (Con): Some months ago, in this House, I reminded the Prime Minister of the fact that my constituency contains more cows than any other. I have that on firm authority, although the exact source has slipped my mind, and as far as I know Somerton and Frome’s bovine supremacy is under no immediate threat.

Those cows, and our entire farming industry, face an enormous opportunity in the shape of the Bill: although perhaps not a giant leap, it is certainly not a small step. It is more a confident stride towards a confident future in which it is this country that decides how to frame our agriculture policy in the interests of our own countryside, our own farmers and our own producers. After almost 50 years of having policy levers pulled by the hands of others—although, I am quite sure, with our best interests at heart—our hands are now back on the controls for a healthier environment, a cleaner environment, better soil health, better animal welfare standards, better public access to the countryside and, rather importantly for Somerset, better flooding control.

Let us not forget food production. Land management and food production must work hand in hand not only to provide the greatest environmental benefits, but to feed the country. With that in mind, I am delighted to welcome the Bill and, in particular, the financial powers in part 1, in which we at last depart from the area-based standards, better public access to the countryside and, rather importantly for Somerset, better flooding control.

The focus really needs to be on how, by virtue of the best practice in improving productivity, we can deliver those environmental benefits. The two aims must run together. It is, after all, the Somerset grass that feeds the Somerset cow and gives forth our glorious Somerset milk and cheese.

**Dr Andrew Murrison** (South West Wiltshire) (Con): My hon. Friend will know, because his constituency neighbours mine, that Arla, one of the biggest producers of dairy products, is in my constituency. In welcoming this Bill, as both he and I clearly do, does he nevertheless share the concerns of Arla as a first purchaser that clause 25 in particular might cause difficulties for it, while also trying to eschew the bad behaviour of rogue producers?

**David Warburton**: My hon. Friend is absolutely right. I have also spoken to Arla and I understand that there are concerns around that issue. I suspect that, during the passage of this Bill, there will be much scope for tweaks and additions. Our food security must come from targeting support for domestic agriculture so that we achieve not only the stability of food supply, but the environmental outcomes that pave the way to a sustainable countryside.

Agriculture in the west country, as elsewhere, needs help with both competitiveness and resilience. It needs to manage risk, market fluctuations and changeable conditions on a daily basis. The financial provisions in part 1 will be vital in helping farmers improve productivity, thereby shoring them up against adverse conditions.

**Mr John Hayes** (South Holland and The Deepings) (Con): Will my hon. Friend also draw attention to clause 25, which deals with the outrage that dares not speak its name in the countryside, namely the treatment of primary and secondary producers by monolithic, all-powerful supermarkets? For a long time, as he will recognise, the supermarkets have ridden roughshod over good commercial practice and it is time that this wise and insightful Secretary of State took action and rebalanced the food chain in the interests of farmers and growers.

**David Warburton**: I add my voice to that of my right hon. Friend in hoping that Ministers are fully aware of the misbehaviours of supermarkets and are prepared to push them in the right direction, but farmers also need to know what to expect.

My constituency is ornamented with innumerable orchards and fruit farms, from which pour the juices that make the finest—sometimes dangerously fine—cider.

Clause 10 allows the Government to modify and discontinue the EU fruit and vegetable scheme, as the Secretary of State alluded to. I understand that existing programmes will continue to completion and a successor scheme is planned, but I ask Ministers exactly how that scheme will be framed. Any details would be enormously valuable.

Equally, it would be useful to know from the Minister a little more of the details of the Government’s intentions around the reduction of direct payments in the first year and beyond of the agricultural transition described in clause 7. Although it is desirable to move away from the current system, it is important that this is done in a phased and controlled way; and although it is also important to move towards the environmental land management system, it is also possible that the coming years may prove challenging for farming. In these circumstances there needs to be sufficient scope for the Government to make the necessary interventions to ease pressure.

We can set out clear objectives for improving soil and water quality, improving access to the countryside, protecting habitats and the environment, and flood mitigation. These are all worthy and essential elements of policy, but the Government understand well that food production is the key to unlocking our golden environmental heritage. Managing the financial and policy framework for our growers and livestock farmers will allow them to hold that key and use it effectively.

While I am on the subject of risk, I must mention my private Member’s Bill, the Rivers Authorities and Land Drainage Bill, which is due to have its Second Reading...
Later this month. It would give the Secretary of State the power to put rivers authorities such as the Somerset Rivers Authority on a statutory basis, raise the precept and allow them to plan effectively. Should my Bill fall at this fence, perhaps the Minister would like to take those ideas forward; there may be room in this Bill.

As we face continued uncertainty—tempered, of course, with optimism and confidence—about the outcome of negotiations in Brussels, we must ensure that agricultural policy is not only firm, but flexible enough to accommodate the shifting sands between us. I am quite sure that the Government’s will is very much in that direction. While admiring the confident stride of the Bill, I look forward to our next steps with great anticipation, as do the innumerable cows scattered across the Somerset fields.

Several hon. Members rose—

Mr Deputy Speaker (Sir Lindsay Hoyle): Order. I will have to bring the time limit down to five minutes; I did ask Members to help, but they did not wish to.

3.57 pm

Sandy Martin (Ipswich) (Lab): It is a pleasure to follow the hon. Member for Somerton and Frome (David Warburton). I agree that we need more certainty, but not that this is an excellent Bill without that lack of certainty. Without any certainty, I cannot see that it is a particularly valuable Bill.

I think that the Secretary of State would readily acknowledge that this is essentially an enabling Bill. It enables him to make regulations: to protect our environment, or not to protect our environment; to support some farmers financially, but not necessarily to tell them beforehand whether they would get that support, or what they would get it for; to support the public access to the countryside; or not; and even to create offences without Parliament knowing what they will be before agreeing to give him those powers.

What the Bill does not do is lay out a duty, a process, a funding mechanism or any other indication of how the Secretary of State will ensure that farmers in this country will produce food that is healthy, environmentally friendly, animal welfare friendly—or, indeed, any food at all. What on earth is the point of our giving the Secretary of State vague and plenipotentiary powers to encourage and enforce the highest possible environmental, health and animal welfare standards in English agriculture if we end up buying all our food from non-European countries where we have no influence whatever over the environmental impact of their agriculture and cannot be certain of the animal welfare regimes or employment regimes under which that food is produced? If the Government are serious about promoting healthy food, why is there no food and farming framework? Why are they not willing to use any future funding regime to promote the production of healthy foods?

Some mention has been made of mung beans. I am actually very fond of broad beans. I would eat far more broad beans if more were available in the shops, but I hardly ever find them. Why, among all the various powers that the Secretary of State is taking, does he not wish to take any to encourage the production of healthy food that I always thought agriculture was meant to be about?

Sir Patrick McLoughlin (Derbyshire Dales) (Con): I am grateful for the opportunity to speak in this debate. May I begin by endorsing what the Secretary of State said about my hon. Friend the Minister for Agriculture, Fisheries and Food, who is widely respected and has overseen this subject during our five years in government? I realise that for him and for the Secretary of State, withdrawal from the European community will give them the power so importantly contained in the Bill, which frees us from the common agricultural policy. Although I personally thought that we should remain in the European Union, I well understand the desire in the agricultural industry to put the Bill on the statute book and to see how the future will be laid out.

It is worth bearing in mind the reason why our countryside is so attractive and visited by many people, particularly in my constituency and the Peak district: it has been farmed and looked after by our farmers for generations. I hope that the Minister of State can speak in his winding-up speech about the importance that we place on food production. Some of the less favoured areas in my constituency cannot be easily farmed without some form of support. That is very important indeed, and I wonder why we have not copied what is available in schedule 3 to Wales so that it is available to England.

Replacing the current system, which pays farmers according to the total land farmed, rather than a specific public benefit, is very important indeed. At the present moment in time, the top 10% of recipients receive almost 50% of payments, while the bottom 20% receive just 2%, which does not reflect the farming or agricultural good provided by many smallholdings and small farms in the uplands. I very much want that to be encouraged.

A lot has changed in agriculture over the past few years. I remember thinking that the foot-and-mouth crisis would be a big problem for me, as I had a large agricultural constituency. In fact, it was the tourism industry, which is important in the Derbyshire dales, that suffered the most. A third of total farm business comes from farm diversification. Rural tourism provides £90 billion a year to the UK economy. There are opportunities, and we need to support our farms.

The Bill has been welcomed by a number of organisations, but I hope that we do not somehow replace a Brussels bureaucracy with a bureaucracy that is even more constraining for farmers and the way they farm. I am pretty sure that the Secretary of State would not want that. However, I fear that some of the bodies that he works with and some of the Government bodies responsible for countryside issues may take a different view, so I look forward to his ensuring that there is an iron rod to tackle how regulations are imposed on agriculture, so that we let British farmers get on with farming.

4.4 pm

Ben Lake (Ceredigion) (PC): Agriculture’s economic contribution to rural areas has already been emphasised this afternoon. It applies to Wales, and in particular Ceredigion, just as much as the other countries of the UK.

The structure of the Welsh agricultural industry is, at least for the time being, rooted in the family farm. In Wales, the average size of holdings is 48 hectares, which
is significantly less than that in the UK, and the industry’s share of total employment in Wales is three times the UK average. It is important to note that, as a result, agriculture is of not only economic importance, but cultural importance, sustaining the Welsh language and the fabric of rural life.

I do not intend to go into detail about what a new agricultural policy for Wales should look like or how it should work, for such matters are rightly beyond the scope of the Bill and will be determined in the Senedd in Cardiff. While policy decisions relating to the future of Welsh agriculture are devolved, their funding ultimately is not, so I wish to concentrate my remarks on that.

Much has been said in this debate about the importance of direct payments, and in particular ensuring the viability of the agricultural sector. The industry in Wales is heavily dependent on the support it receives through the CAP. In 2017, for example, payments represented 107% of the total income from farming, compared with 68% in Northern Ireland and 52% in England. Any changes to the overall level of funding for UK agriculture will therefore have a particular impact in Wales, and as farmers manage around 80% of land in Wales, ensuring their viability is essential if other outcomes of agricultural policy are to be realised.

Liz Saville Roberts: I am sure that my hon. Friend agrees that it is not enough for Ministers to wax lyrical about farmers being the stewards of the uplands. They must also recognise that, in Wales, a living countryside agrees that it is not enough for Ministers to wax lyrical but if they were to make such a framework subject to funding decisions that would bind successive Governments, I appreciate that Ministers are hesitant to make unilateral as under the present multi-annual financial framework. That would not afford the industry the same certainty be taken by the UK Government, subject to the Treasury’s have suggested that decisions about future funding will be made on the basis of what they do best: producing food. The power given to Ministers was acknowledged, but there needs to be increased scrutiny of contracts, risk-based assessments or inspections, and earned recognition so that the costs in time and money of needless and duplicated visits

I conclude by reiterating the need for any future financial frameworks to be agreed, built and maintained in co-operation between the four nations. When the Minister responds to the debate, perhaps he could assure farmers that such decisions will be made on the basis of shared governance and that the unique characteristics of the industries in each country will be supported accordingly. I am afraid to say that, at present, such an assurance is lacking.

Mrs Sheryll Murray (South East Cornwall) (Con): I have met some farmers and local NFU branch representatives in my constituency—yes, the meeting took place literally in the middle of a field—and they raised specific concerns. They talked about the need for the Government to ensure that UK farmers are treated equally and that they will not be at a disadvantage compared with those in the devolved countries, Europe and the rest of the world. They would therefore welcome a universal framework that applies to the whole United Kingdom.

Some farmers in South East Cornwall have supported public money for public goods as a good principle, but there is some concern about the ability of individual farmers to access schemes to replace the average Cornwall payment of £16,000 under the basic payment scheme through increased productivity. Tenants are concerned about how they will have access to environmental payments when landlords are seeking to retain them, even though the majority of the public good is delivered by the occupier—soil, water and carbon.

There is a general feeling that the level of regulation and inspection from Government and retailers is becoming too great, and that the administrative burden needs to be significantly reduced so that farmers can concentrate on what they do best: producing food. The power given to Ministers was acknowledged, but there needs to be increased scrutiny of contracts, risk-based assessments or inspections, and earned recognition so that the costs in time and money of needless and duplicated visits
are eradicated. One farmer gave an example of a recent visit by trading standards to check the harvest interval of his onions, in case someone ate them raw.

Some farmers mentioned the need for sustainable and profitable farm businesses to deliver public goods, and the fact that these factors seem to have been left out of the Bill. They also raised the impact of last winter’s cold weather, with the snow, and the very dry summer. Those environmental factors have had a detrimental impact on businesses and on the security of food supply. Indeed, concern was expressed that the Bill does not acknowledge a secure food supply as a public good, which is difficult to understand in view of the climate and trade challenges. The question of the farmer’s position in the supply chain is always to the fore, and farmers want to know how the Bill will help.

I acknowledge that the Bill will improve matters, but more support is needed for producer organisations, including a wider exemption from competition law and further financial support to engender collaboration. The need for high environmental and animal welfare standards is acknowledged, but it will be impossible for farmers to deliver if their businesses are not profitable.

I welcome the Bill, despite these concerns. I hope that my right hon. Friend the Secretary of State will address some of my farmers’ concerns and sensible suggestions when the Bill is in Committee. I have every confidence that he will be supporting the farmers, and I will support the Bill tonight.

4.13 pm

Anna McMorrin (Cardiff North) (Lab): The Bill gives the UK a huge opportunity to revitalise the countryside in a way that meets the needs of people, farming, food and the environment for generations to come. I welcome the Bill’s broad thrust of shifting financial assistance to help farmers to restore and improve our natural environment, and public money for public goods. I also welcome the Secretary of State outlining the provision in the Bill to allow the Welsh Labour Government to set their own targets.

Crucially, however, the Bill fails in many areas. It fails to safeguard our food supply or to tackle health inequalities. It falls well short on properly protecting our natural environment. Depleting soils, losing pollinators, and polluting waters do nothing for farm productivity. At a time when we face huge environmental challenges, with the ecological challenges of climate change and biodiversity loss, we also need a Bill that delivers on outcomes, with clear targets.

The key weakness is the failure to secure long-term future funding for the agricultural sector, or to place a duty on Ministers to set budgets that reflect the scale of financial need and to specify timeframes for the longevity of those budgets. There is no doubt that the Secretary of State has excellent oratory skills, but does he have the negotiating skills to argue for the appropriate budget from the Treasury and to specify where and how it is to be spent? Can he also confirm by how much the DEFRA budget will be cut in future? The Bill must also ensure fair distribution across the four countries of the UK. I was pleased to hear the Secretary of State say that funding will not be Barnettised, but how will it be decided and assessed, and exactly how much will it be? That is crucial.

As it stands, the Bill fails properly to address unresolved issues between the Welsh Government and Whitehall, particularly around the red meat levy, which must be properly distributed. Change is required to underpin mechanisms for a fairer and more representative distribution of the levy, but the Bill fails to recognise that. This issue has been debated over many years—I took part in the debate many years ago—and it is disappointing that it is not addressed in the Bill. Lesley Griffiths, the Welsh Cabinet Secretary, has also expressed her disappointment that the Bill does not contain provisions to improve the functioning of the red meat levy.

Will the Secretary of State confirm that he will fight to save our 14 food products in Wales that have been granted protected name status? Foods such as Anglesey sea salt, Welsh lamb, Welsh cider and Caerphilly cheese, to name just a few, are all products that enjoy protected status but are under threat. I would like to him confirm that he will do so and say whether he will make provision in the Bill.

My final point is about trade. This Bill is utterly dependent on Brexit and the disastrous negotiations that are currently taking place. We know what World Trade Organisation rules would mean for our farmers, our agriculture and our land, let alone our environmental safeguards and protections. They would mean the end of farmers, businesses, food production and safeguards—the end of British agriculture as we know it. We need confirmation that this will be taken into account, and we need that assurance not only from the Secretary of State, but from the Government.

We need an agriculture Bill that delivers outcomes, delivers on food security, delivers on environmental protections, keeps farmers on our land, addresses the huge challenges that we face and sustains a thriving British farming, food and drink sector. I think that this Bill falls short.

4.18 pm

Bill Wiggin (North Herefordshire) (Con): It is a pleasure to follow the hon. Member for Cardiff North (Anna McMorrin). I draw the House’s attention to my entry in the Register of Members’ Financial Interests. I am the chairman of the Pasture-Fed Livestock Association, which promotes grass-fed as an alternative to grain-fed in our meat supply chain. I also keep a small herd of grain-free Hereford cattle at my home in Herefordshire.

The Agriculture Bill is a hugely important piece of legislation that will directly affect the majority of businesses in my constituency. There are over 2,000 businesses in Herefordshire in the agricultural sector, and 84% of the land in Herefordshire is devoted to agriculture. Farmers in Herefordshire welcome the reassurances that funding systems for farming subsidies will be slowly phased out over seven years, starting in 2020. That enables them to be sure of what lies ahead in the medium term and gives them the opportunity to have some input into how the system should work after the seven-year transition. There are issues with land values and the importance of subsidies over that period, but they can be dealt with.

The philosophy of public money for public goods is the right approach to take as long as we remember that the most important public good is health. That can be improved through the production of high quality, high welfare food for the British market. I am also supportive of increased environmental protections and higher animal
welfare standards. I am, however, nervous of a system in which food production itself is not the main goal of agriculture.

There is a way to support agriculture that solves the productivity dilemma. As chairman of the Pasture-Fed Livestock Association, I have visited some of our members’ farms. I believe they provide an excellent model for how British livestock, or beef and lamb farming, should look in the future. The 100% pasture-fed model is one which is: better for the environment, through carbon sequestration; better for animals, coming top, according to Compassion for World Farming, of all welfare systems; better for the consumer, because of the high omega-3 fatty acids; better for the climate and our health; and, crucially, more profitable for the farmer.

In 2016, the PFLA produced a document called “It Can Be Done”. It demonstrates that the economic case for pasture-fed compares very favourably with more intensive farming models. A survey earlier this year showed that it is better for animals. Some 53% of PFLA farmers reported a reduction in the use of antibiotics, 51% a reduction in vet bills and 66% noticed an overall improvement in the health of their stock. It is better for the environment. Some 81% of members have made significant changes to their grazing management, with over 50% achieving a longer grazing season and 25% seeing a movement towards that. Some 32% have reduced their synthetic fertiliser use and 64% have reported an increased diversity in their grass swards and bird life on their farms. Some 55% saw an increase in mammal and insect life. In animal welfare and environmental criteria, nobody reported a single negative outcome. That is good for the consumer, who will get that high omega-3 fatty acid which leads to the manufacture of conjugated linoleic acid, the only substance in one’s body that can fight tumours. This is a really good way of helping not just the richest but the poorest sectors in our society.

There is one thing we need to do to make this work: we need to change the definition of pasture-fed. At the moment, it means that 51% of an animal’s life must be on grass. It needs to mean 100%. We on the Conservative Benches have been campaigning for honesty in labelling on grass. It needs to mean 100%. We on the Conservative Benches have been campaigning for honesty in labelling on grass. It needs to mean 100%. We on the Conservative Benches have been campaigning for honesty in labelling on grass.

Let us be clear: farming cannot be environmentally sustainable if it is not financially sustainable. Farmers in the uplands have low profit margins and face considerable volatility, and Ministers must guarantee that the new payments will be equal in value to the basic payment and rural development schemes. They should consider making income support and stabilisation purposes for which payments can be made. Clause 18 is drafted to provide short-term market support, but it needs to cover chronic disruption in the event of changes to trade regimes that damage domestic farm incomes.

There is a real risk of a disorderly or no deal Brexit, and Ministers must be able to deal with that. Clause 26 gives the Secretary of State powers to comply with WTO obligations, but all the future trading arrangements remain a mystery. They will have a massive impact on farmers, whether we are talking about access to the EU—personally, I believe we should stay in the customs union and it seems that the Prime Minister is coming round to that—or the regime for imports.

The Bill should contain provisions to require all food imported to the UK to be produced to at least equivalent standards as they relate to animal welfare, environmental protection and labour. I have asked DEFRA Ministers 39 times whether they will guarantee that they will not have imports of cheap lamb from New Zealand, Australia, Canada and America. They have a 40th chance tonight to answer the question.

4.28 pm

Sir Hugo Swire (East Devon) (Con): I very much look forward to supporting the Bill later this evening. It is important and long overdue, regardless of Brexit, although, of course, Brexit will impact on trade deals and our ability to export and strike bilateral trade deals.
Farmers, like all industries, need as much certainty as they can get at the present time. I therefore think it is entirely regrettable that the Scottish National party has chosen to put politics above certainty for farmers in Scotland. Farmers in Scotland deserve better.

The challenge for my right hon. Friend the Secretary of State—and he is a friend of mine—is to strike a balance between environmental stewardship and the production of food. There will always be those on all sides who argue that he is erring on one side or the other, but what he must take away from this debate is the fact that it is not just about managing land but about the production of food. We all have these balances in our own lives and our own constituencies. In my beautiful constituency we have to balance the area of outstanding natural beauty status against farming, which is a constant challenge. There is also the issue of access to the countryside, which I will come to in a minute.

My right hon. Friend can further champion the industry by doing more than the Bill stipulates. He can talk more about, and do more to support, our land-based colleges. In my constituency I have Bicton College, which he visited in a previous incarnation as Education Secretary in May 2012 to open the earth centre. We should do more to get young people into farming and show them the industry. The number of county farms has shrunk, and it is more difficult for young farmers to get in. At the other end is the work of charitable trusts such as the Addington Fund, which looks after farmers when they have to vacate their residences at the end of their farming careers. We need to show young people that there is a future in farming. Frankly, there is a demographic problem in farming and we need to encourage more young people into it.

My right hon. Friend has a real chance to be a champion in food production. I alluded to food labelling in an intervention. For too long, we have put up with misleading food labelling and country of origin labelling. The consumer deserves better and needs to know the country of origin. We need to know what is purely British—what has been reared, produced and packaged in Britain—and what has been imported into Britain, repackaged and sold in a misleading way. He can go much further in that respect.

Another issue of great concern around the Chamber is that of livestock transportation. We can ensure that we have the toughest possible regimes for our livestock exports, which I hope will increase after Brexit.

My right hon. Friend has done a lot regarding our slaughterhouses and abattoirs. I have written to him in respect of one of my small abattoirs, which does very little business. I think we have to have a light touch to secure the best possible practice. One abattoir in my constituency has CCTV as well as someone sitting there, even though it slaughters animals only once or twice a week. The requirements are very onerous for such a small business, and I hope my right hon. Friend will look at those issues when they arise. We should not shy away from the fact that the practices of some communities—for example, halal butchery and orthodox Jewish butchery—are simply not acceptable in animal husbandry terms.

I said earlier that we have a chance to introduce a “buy British” policy, and somebody from the Opposition said that we could not do that under WTO rules. We do not know the rules yet, but we should put buying British products for our schools, hospitals and armed forces at the forefront of everything we do once we are out of the EU.

On land access, my right hon. Friend is absolutely right. We want to encourage people to make more use of the countryside as part of the anti-obesity campaign, but there is a quid pro quo. The landscape looks as it does because it is farmed. It is man-made. Stone-walling, ditch-digging and hedge-laying are all done at farmers’ expense, so farmers are due some compensation. Simply to open up land irrespective of that, without acknowledging that it is private land that people are paying to maintain, is entirely wrong. I think there is a wonderful opportunity to review the whole question of footpaths, which are way out of date, and perhaps to look at compensation for farms that are covered in footpaths. We need to look at bridleways and the use of off-road vehicles. We can do so many of these things now that we are coming out of the EU.

This country should be able to feed itself; that is the duty of the Government. I think that the Opposition amendment is unnecessary and, frankly, unintelligible. I believe that the country should be able to feed itself, and I hope that the Bill will bring that goal one step closer.

4.33 pm

Caroline Lucas (Brighton, Pavilion) (Green): Over the past 50 years, through the intensification of agriculture, we have lost much of our nature and wildlife. I pay real tribute to Chris Packham and the wonderful march for nature that he organised a few weeks ago in London, where thousands of people marched through the city to demand that we change how we manage the land to protect the species with which we are fortunate enough to share the planet.

Let us take as one example the amazing bird that is the swift. One bird can fly a million miles, yet we have lost 50% of our swift population over the past 20 years alone, as a direct result of the way in which we manage the land. Our wild spaces, flowers and animals that give our landscape such magic and beauty have been devastated by the impact of our farming and land management, and it is now acknowledged that that must change.

That understanding needs to be at the heart of the Bill. We must use it as an opportunity to transform how we live with and in our countryside and rebalance our relationship not only with nature, but with how we produce and consume food. Sadly, despite some positive steps, the Bill fails to engage meaningfully with the endeavour to restore and protect the natural world. I want to talk about a few of the areas in which it does so.

The first failure, about which others have spoken, is that while the Bill provides powers for the Secretary of State, it does not place duties on the Government to act. That must change if it is to have a real impact. There needs to be a clear framework for the establishment of environmental land management schemes and the date by which they must be up and running. Given that more than 70% of UK land is used for agricultural purposes, now is the time to place a legally binding responsibility on Ministers to ensure that it is managed and farmed in a way that restores the natural world. Without such a guarantee, this—like so much of the Government’s green agenda—will remain a Bill with too many words and not enough substance.
Secondly—others have raised this issue as well—we need to have guarantees of longer-term funding, rather than leaving the Bill vulnerable to wavering political priorities. We need a clear indication that long-term funding will continue well beyond 2022.

Thirdly, it is important to adopt a new definition of agricultural productivity. I fear that unless that happens, there will be a real risk that the Bill could undermine the policies that flow from other parts of clause 1, on assistance for the restoration and protection of the natural environment and animal welfare. DEFRA’s guidance on food chain productivity clearly states that the measure of productivity that is currently being used “does not incorporate external effects on society and the environment.” We must have a definition of productivity that captures those wider external effects if we are to be sure that the Bill will be successful.

In my first intervention on the Secretary of State, I mentioned public health. It should be at the front and centre of the Bill, and this should have been an opportunity to ensure that it is at the heart of our farming system. The Secretary of State has said:

“Food production is ultimately about health.”

If it is—and I agree that it is—why is health not firmly included in clause 1 as a clearly stated outcome of the Bill?

The Bill needs to do an awful lot more on climate change. In 2016, agricultural emissions accounted for 10% of UK greenhouse gas emissions, and according to the Committee on Climate Change, there has been virtually no progress at all in reducing them since 2008. The Bill should therefore contain a clear commitment to reaching net zero emissions in the agricultural sector by 2050. Ministers must, as a matter of urgency, get serious about what climate change means for farming and land use, get serious about helping farmers to harness the potential of land to capture carbon through trees and soil, and embrace ecologically sensitive farming techniques.

There is also the issue of biodiversity. The Bill should be more explicit in its ambition to protect and restore the natural world. In the UK, almost 60% of species are in long-term decline, and one in five mammals are at risk of extinction. The ambitions in clause 1 should be much higher. There should be a clear provision for reversing biodiversity decline, which should be linked to the 25-year environment plan, should be based on the latest science and should connect with the UK’s obligations under the convention on biological diversity. We need to channel a significant proportion of the finance provided in clauses 1 and 2 towards farmers who adopt agro-ecological and organic farming methods. We know that organic farms use far fewer antibiotics. They also have, on average, 50% more wildlife than conventional farms and deliver healthier soils, with nearly 50% more humic acid, the component of the soil that stores carbon over the long term.

Finally, let me say something about trade. We absolutely must have a provision that says, loudly and clearly, that we will not reduce our standards: we will not allow food of a lower standard to enter the country and threaten our food, our farming and our animal welfare standards.

4.38 pm

John Redwood (Wokingham) (Con): There has been a big decline in our self-sufficiency as food producers during the 46 years in which we have been in the common agricultural policy. As a result, we are now net importers from the continent of Europe, to the tune of £20 billion a year—a very large part of our balance of payments deficit—of various processed food, that we could rear or grow for ourselves, or process for ourselves if we wished. I hope that, as the Secretary of State works away at the Bill during its passage through the House, he will take on board what is being said by all of us who are urging him to make good production—high-quality food production, and local food production—a central part of his mission and what he is trying to achieve in conjunction with our agricultural businesses and our farmers, because much more can be achieved.

One of my colleagues has already pointed out that we could have new procurement rules that would allow us competitive procurement that also takes into account food miles. A really good green policy is to get the food miles down. We do not need ships and trucks carrying around bulky and quite heavy items of not huge value, when we could be growing them for ourselves and the farmer could be making a profit because transport costs would be lower, so can we please do that?

Will the Secretary of State understand that perhaps the most important thing farmers need to know, from 30 March next year if we leave without an agreement or from 2020 if we leave with an agreement, is what our schedule of tariffs will look like, because Brexit is not a great threat or problem? It is a massive opportunity. Here is an industry that has been wrecked and damaged and pillaged for 46 years, almost as badly as the fishing industry in some cases, which was probably the worst hit, and we have the opportunity to take it back in hand and encourage those who work on our behalf in the industry and to bring a bit of sunshine to the operation to show that there is a huge market opportunity out there.

The great joy is that this Bill rightly takes powers so that the Secretary of State and the Government can do what they need to do with the WTO, which will be running our trade framework whatever we do by way of agreement or no agreement. The WTO also has a pretty important role in this today, but of course we cannot influence it directly because the EU handles the account, and very badly it does so from the UK point of view.

If we look at our tariff schedule, we see at the moment that we have eye-wateringly high tariffs on temperate foods that we can grow or produce for ourselves from outside the EU, but zero tariffs on temperate products we could rear or grow for ourselves from inside the EU, and that competitive onslaught from some of the intense, and often subsidised and highly capitalised, farming on the continent has done enormous damage to our market share and undermined the businesses of many of our farmers over the 46 years we have been in the EU.

The Government should set out urgently for consultation what our tariff schedule will look like if we are leaving on 30 March 2019, because I assume the tariffs will be above zero for the EU as they have got to be the same as for the rest of the world, but I assume that we would want lower overall tariffs than the EU imposes on the rest of the world, and I assume that we would want to flex the tariffs down more on the things we cannot grow and rear for ourselves and would also want to make sure there is protection in there, in the spirit of our current regime, which is heavily protected against non-EU products.
I am not sure what the right balance is; that is something I am sure my right hon. Friend and the International Trade Secretary have either worked out or will work out quite soon, but the sooner we consult on it, the more hope we will give the farming industry. It must feel part of this process, because these will be its tariffs and they offer us this great opportunity to get access to some cheaper food where we are not competing and have uniform protection at a sensible level for both the EU and the non-EU, because it is the EU that is causing the main threat.

May I remind my right hon. Friend that he is our English Agriculture Minister and we want him to speak for England? Who in this Government does speak for England? I come into the Chamber and hear debates about the Scottish problem and the Irish border, but we must not forget England, our home base for most of us on this side of the House. England expects; England wants better; England wants to be able to compete; England can have funding implications for the devolved Administrations. The NFUS has sought a legal opinion on part 7 of the WTO clauses, and it completely backs up our concerns.

Alan Brown (Kilmarnock and Loudoun) (SNP): It is a pleasure to follow the right hon. Member for Wokingham (John Redwood), who outlined his vision of a socialist protectionist England in the future, which certainly surprised me.

This has been billed as an historic Agriculture Bill, the first since 1947, but the truth is that it feels like a missed opportunity. I realise that it is an enabling Bill, but there is not enough clarity on other matters, particularly future funding and common UK frameworks. The farming unions across the nations have made it clear that there is insufficient reference to agricultural activity and how it will be supported and incentivised going forward.

I realise that only clauses 22 to 26 cover Scotland, and there is no doubt that policy decisions taken for England can have funding implications for the devolved nations. It is therefore critical that we get to know what the arrangements will be for agreeing future funding settlements. I say to Scottish Tory MPs that the NFUS wants the budgets to be devolved to Scotland to get the clarity that it seeks—the clarity that the Tory MPs say that they are demanding.

We know that Scottish farmers are not getting the £160 million convergence uplift money that they should have received, but Scottish Tory MPs have stood by and achieved nothing on that. How is that deficit going to be addressed? The NFUS has also highlighted the red meat levy, which is costing Scottish farmers £1.5 million a year. How is that going to be addressed? These precedents confirm why we and the Scottish Government are concerned about the direction of policy and funding, yet we are supposed to be relaxed about the power grab and the UK Government’s ability to legislate for Scotland.

One example that could affect farmers is trade and trade resolution. The UK Government have refused to allow devolved representation on the Trade Remedies Board. During the Bill Committee, the then Trade Minister stated that devolved representatives would not necessarily be impartial. He was effectively saying that the UK Government did not trust our representation and that we should just let them get on with it and deal with this for us. Other recent indicators include the early pulling of the renewables subsidy; the broken promises of amendments to the European Union (Withdrawal) Bill and the fact that the UK Government are taking the Scottish Government to court.

Then there was the 2014 campaign, in which we were told that the only way to stay in Europe was to vote no. Well, we know how that has worked out. Scotland voted to remain within the EU, but the referendum result is now having an impact on the fruit and vegetable sector as well as on the food processing sector. The response from the UK Government has been completely inadequate. It was stated earlier that the seasonal agricultural workers scheme is pathetically shy of what is required. Let us bear in mind that the current Secretary of State was the one offering Scotland powers over immigration as a supposed Brexit dividend. What has happened to those powers? It is quite clear that the Tories cannot be trusted. It is therefore imperative that we see what a UK framework for funding will look like, and we need guarantees that it will not be imposed on the devolved Administrations. The NFUS has sought a legal opinion on part 7 of the WTO clauses, and it completely backs up our concerns.

Positive change can happen. A farmer in my constituency, Bryce Cunningham, farms at the historic Mossgiel farm, which was previously home to Rabbie Burns. He has managed to turn his farm into a fully organic dairy farm in just a few years. He started producing and selling his own milk from the farm as a financial cash-flow necessity during the milk price crisis. Since then, he has undergone the full organic conversion. He has now gone plastic free, and his product is in demand all over Scotland. His is a great story, and Scotland has a great story when it comes to the quality of food and produce that we make and supply. That is why we want to protect and grow these sectors further, and why we want the levers of power to be retained at Holyrood and not to be interfered with by Westminster. At the same time, we are happy to work with the UK Government to agree on frameworks that are in the best interests of the nations.

Mr Deputy Speaker (Sir Lindsay Hoyle): I call Richard Drax.

Richard Drax (South Dorset) (Con): Heaven! You caught me by surprise there, Mr Deputy Speaker. I was not ready for that at all. Anyway, thank you very much for calling me to speak. I refer hon. Members to my entry in the Register of Members’ Financial Interests.
Yes, I did vote for Brexit and yes, I am a turkey voting for Christmas because the subsidies that my farm receives will be considerably reduced, putting my business plan if not at risk then certainly into review. I do not object to that: I voted to leave the EU because I believe that that is best for our country. I believe that this is a wonderful opportunity. The Agriculture Bill sets out provisions for farming in this country to be reviewed to a huge degree and to be controlled from this place. As we have heard, that has not happened for decades.

I thank the Minister for Agriculture, Fisheries and Food, my hon. Friend the Member for Camborne and Redruth (George Eustice), who continually comes down to South Dorset to speak to my farmers—even at short notice. He has been incredibly kind and generous with his time, for which I am most grateful, and I am delighted that he is still in place. I am also delighted that the new Secretary of State has taken up this responsible position and that agriculture will be added to environment, food and rural affairs, giving it a far higher priority than has been the case over the past 10, 20 or 30 years. Now that we will have control of our farming, the Secretary of State’s role will be crucial.

I take great pride in representing South Dorset and its farming community. My constituency is the most beautiful in the country—[Interruption] It is true, and I would welcome anyone who wants to come down to see it. Every quarter since I was first elected I meet my farmers to discuss their concerns. Those concerns are then passed to the Minister of State, who kindly passes his responses back down, and the system has worked extremely well. I do all that because I felt that local farmers were not really represented in the past. Getting back control through this Agriculture Bill will be a chance for us to help our farmers to produce the food that this country needs.

There was talk earlier on of educating children, about which I feel strongly. Ten or 11 years ago, I started offering visits to my farm to local schools, and we now welcome between 150 and 200 students every year. They spend the day going around the farm learning how it works and what goes into the food that they eat. At the last visit in June, I was talking to some children and asked them where milk comes from. Sensibly, one boy put his hand up and said, “From the cow,” and I said, “That’s extremely good. Well done!” I then said, “Do you know why the milk comes from the cow?” and there was a bit of a pause before one of them said, “Because the cow has a calf,” and I said, “Absolutely spot on!” Interestingly, as the group was leaving, one of the adults said, “Richard, thank you so much. I have been educated today, because I did not know that a cow had to have a calf to produce milk.” My point is that we need to educate not only our children, but clearly our teachers and everybody else about the significance of agriculture, which I hope we will now be able to do.

My right hon. Friend the Member for North Shropshire (Mr Paterson) went through the statistics about agriculture’s significance. I will not bother the House with them again, but they are significant. We also heard from my right hon. Friend the Member for Wokingham (John Redwood) that Brexit will offer huge opportunities to the agriculture industry. I do not agree with the doom-sayers from the SNP and other Opposition Members who say that we are all going to hell in a handcart. We will have huge opportunities for agricultural business, and I shall be shouting from the rooftops when that day comes.

It is worth noting that it is the farmer who creates the environment that so many of us have talked about. It is our farmers whose standards are, on the whole, way higher than those of our European friends and partners. Let us not forget that, for all intents and purposes, we are the gold standard for farming around the world. Yes, there is room for improvement but, by gum, we set good examples and a very high bar. Down on the farm, those who love the land—and they do—continue to battle legislation, red tape, quangos, politicians and the weather. I ask the Front-Bench team to help with three of those issues: can we remove the red tape and the quangos and prevent too much political interference?

Mrs Emma Lewell-Buck (South Shields) (Lab): The United Nations estimates that over 8 million people in the United Kingdom suffer food insecurity—over 8 million people who are unable to afford to eat or who worry where their next meal will come from. I am astounded that we have been presented with an Agriculture Bill, which should have food at its heart, that contains nothing to address the growing levels of desperate hunger in the UK on this Government’s watch.

Any Bill concerning agricultural markets and our food chain should also address the end of the food supply chain: consumers and, more importantly, the impact of food insecurity on them. Globally, there have been predictions that we are heading for a serious food shortage as early as 2027. As populations rise, conflicts spread and more extreme weather affects food supplies, it is clear that food insecurity will become an even more important issue.

The all-party parliamentary group on hunger, of which I am a member, has taken a deep look at the growing issue of UK hunger. Over recent years, we have found that austerity, punitive welfare reforms, benefit cuts, and inaction on low pay and insecure work, as well as the widening gulf between incomes and the cost of living, are the main drivers of UK hunger. We also found that 3 million children are at risk of hunger during the school holidays and that 1.3 million malnourished older people were “withering away in their own homes”.

I have received answers to parliamentary questions showing that rising levels of hospital admissions for adults and children because of malnutrition are costing the NHS £12 billion per year. We now have approximately 2,000 food banks—that we know of—and evidence has shown time and again that food-bank use alone is an indication of last resort. There are legions of hidden hungry who do not go to food banks and do not ask for help, either out of shame or embarrassment, or because they do not know where to go.

Each time that I have raised the issue of hunger in the House, various Secretaries of State and Ministers have denigrated statistics from charities, researchers, food banks and colleagues, claiming that the figures are not robust enough, or that the information is not reliable enough to inform Government policy. Denying the accuracy of the data or simply turning a blind eye allows them to pretend that the problem does not exist, but it does.

This is where my Food Insecurity Bill comes in. All I am asking is for the Government to replace redundant questions in an existing UK-wide representative survey—such as the living costs and food survey that they
already conduct—with questions pertaining to hunger, and place the results before the House on an annual basis. The Bill is therefore cost-neutral and will give a true, robust and reliable measurement of UK hunger. It is backed by more than 150 MPs from all parties, dozens of peers, 30 organisations and 77% of the public. The cross-party all-party parliamentary group on hunger and the cross-party Environment, Food and Rural Affairs Committee have also advocated such a measurement.

Despite all that support and repeated correspondence with the Minister of State, the Secretary of State and the Prime Minister, the Government remain dogged in their determination not to implement my Bill. I hope that today the Secretary of State will see the merit in adding the asks of my Bill into this Bill. In a country as rich as ours, no one at all should go to bed hungry and wake up hungry. The fact that so many people do is an abject failure of this Government.

Mrs Anne-Marie Trevelyan (Berwick-upon-Tweed) (Con): I refer the House to my entry in the Register of Members’ Financial Interests.

As a rural Northumbrian for more than 20 years, I have been closely involved with the trials and tribulations of the local farmers and land managers, whose livelihood is determined by the health of our rural economy. It is a physically hard life, and the Northumbrian weather—perhaps even more dramatic than that in the constituency of my hon. Friend the Member for South Dorset (Richard Drax)—is a constant companion, with financial rewards sometimes feeling scarce.

The understanding of taxpayer support for farming is a fundamental underpinning of our food supply system, and it is a support that taxpayers buy into, as long as it reaches its intended target and meets its stated aims. The EU’s common agricultural policy did not do that. The voice of UK farmers has too often been drowned out by the demands of French or Spanish farmers. We have been stuck in a system not aimed at investing in the best land use in Northumberland or anywhere else across our islands.

With our departure from the EU and this Bill, we can stop the EU CAP funding bias against our own farming communities and put our own more effective and targeted land-management policy.

As the MP for one of the most sparsely populated constituencies—albeit the most beautiful, and I will take on anyone who wants to fight me on that—I am pleased that is not just farmers who grow food who will benefit from the new system. I have spoken many times about trees, and this debate offers an opportunity to do so again. As the Minister is aware, I believe we need to be planting at least one tree for every citizen, not one for every five, but the target of 11 million needs at least to be met to allow the long-term thinking we need for land management and water basin stabilisation, to support the timber industry’s needs and to reduce long-term reliance on imports for biomass, for housing frames and for furniture. We must aim to be able to become self-sustaining in timber.

Deidre Brock: Will the hon. Lady give way?

Mrs Trevelyan: I will not. Timber absorbs carbon dioxide as it grows and then holds that carbon a second time as wood products. I ask the Minister to consider, as part of the Borderlands initiative, planting a Borderlands forest as part of our meeting our tree-planting targets—not so much a wall dividing us from our Scottish colleagues, but a biodiverse habitat that the English and the Scots can nurture together.

5.2 pm

Ruth George (High Peak) (Lab): Were the Minister in his place, I would remind him that many of us have been attending agricultural shows and sheepdog trials for many years, and not just in our role as MPs. Our farms
and our farming communities are part of our way of life in areas such as the Peak district. It is important to remember that when we examine the Bill. Promoting agriculture and the proper management of our land is important not only to tourists and visitors, but to those of us who live in rural areas and want our communities to be maintained.

Farming is important not only to our economy but to ensuring that we can continue the rural way of life. I am talking not just about upland farmers, but lowland farmers—in the Peak district, we have both the hills and the dales—sheep farmers, dairy farmers, beef farmers and smallholders. Most farming families have been farming for generations. They understand animal welfare, looking after the land, and how to put together a dry stone wall—a skill that takes years of dedication to acquire.

The rural way of life needs to be sustainable for future generations. The Bill is being introduced at a time when the average age of a UK farmer is 59, 30% are over 65 and only 3% are under 35. The Bill needs to be able to give the new generation the certainty to carry on in farming. At the moment, it is hard for them to see a way forward. The number of farmers in the UK has dropped from 140,000 in 2011 to 120,000 now: a drop of 11% in just seven years. The average income is about £20,000 a year—for lowland sheep grazing, it is about £16,000—and that is for all the hours farmers put in. They work 24/7 in many cases, particularly during the sort of weather we have had this year. Farmers have been out in the freezing weather and out taking water to the uplands when the water pressure has dropped and the supply has not been able to continue. Farming is a way of life and farmers want to be able to continue living it, but they are very concerned that the proposals in the Bill may mean—we have not seen any figures yet—that that is impossible.

It is a pleasure to follow the hon. Member for Berwick-upon-Tweed (Mrs Trevelyan), who set out clearly the problems that lots of farmers are having with the Rural Payments Agency and the bureaucracy involved in trying to claim a lot of the agri-environment payments on offer at the moment. The thought that their whole income has to be derived from those sorts of projects—filling out of huge forms, all the bureaucracy, taking photos, reporting everything online and having multiple visits—does not fill them with confidence for the future.

One of my local farmers reported that the RPA had asked him whether he was measuring his dry stone wall in metres or acres, and that was when he started to worry that RPA staff really do not know about farming and are far too remote from the farms and what is actually going on.

At the moment, farms are supported with nearly £3 billion via the CAP. Fortunately, we are going to see that continue, but direct payments make up 78% of that amount, so they are incredibly important to grazing animal farms, which actually make a loss. The direct payments are a source of sustained income on which they can rely when they are looking to invest. We need to make sure we have a system that recognises different types of farms, as has been said by Members from across the House. It may well be that we can have different systems of payment for different types of farm, and that that will take away the problems that farmers have having, but the Government need to make sure they set that out clearly for farmers for the future.

That brings me on to one of the most important factors: the concept of “water first”. DEFRA asked me to chair the UK Water Partnership, which we are taking forward. Basically, if we are doing the right thing for water, everything else environmentally and for those businesses that depend on the environment falls very quickly into place. I commend the hon. Member for Wakefield (Mary Creagh), the Chair of the Environment Audit Committee, for mentioning the four parts per 1,000 initiative. If we are doing the right things for water, we are doing the right things for soil. That means that soil is locking up carbon and being retained for future generations. That is good business as well as good environmental management.

In the short time that I have left, I want to refer to a very important theme in the Bill. When we talk about agriculture, we need to remind ourselves that the second part of that word is “culture”, and culture is all about the human element of farming. We have heard eloquent speeches today about the beauty of the landscape. Many billions of pounds are made by industries such as tourism on the basis of human interactions in our countryside that go back centuries. That is apparent even in our wildlife. Barn owls, corn buntings and field
mice are species that developed because the landscape was managed. We need to encourage the next generation of farmers to be the great land managers of the future.

I hope that I have read the Bill correctly and that it includes an element that will allow those who have come to the end of their farming career to make way for the new generation. I am hugely impressed by the young generation of farmers I meet. The people whom I met at the south of England show last Sunday were getting awards for really innovative thinking. They are the ones I want to see managing the land in the future. It is unkind to call farmers “bed blockers”, but there are some who want to retire and to be given the incentives to do so. If I have read this Bill correctly—I hope the Minister will give us some assurances—it implements mechanisms that will allow long-term farmers to retire with dignity, making way for a new breed of entrepreneurial land managers who can cope with the difficult environmental problems of the future and make a contribution to agriculture in our country.

5.12 pm

Mary Creagh (Wakefield) (Lab): It is a pleasure to follow the thoughtful speeches of the right hon. Member for Newbury (Richard Benyon) and my hon. Friends the Members for High Peak (Ruth George) and for South Shields (Mrs Lewell-Buck). We have heard quite a lot in general about the sunlit uplands of Brexit, and about a rosy bucolic Brexit Britain, but much of the debate has missed out the red meat—questions such as what the quantum of funding will be, what powers the Secretary of State will have, and what outcomes we are seeking to achieve.

Two years ago, the Environmental Audit Committee warned that UK farmers faced a triple whammy from Brexit: first, the loss of subsidies; secondly, the potential for tariffs on exports; and, thirdly, the threat of being undercut by cheap imports from countries with lower standards in food safety, animal welfare and environmental standards. Today, I want to talk about my two concerns with this Bill. First, it gives Ministers the power to spend taxpayers’ money with no accountability. I can think of no other area of public policy where we would be discussing the expenditure of £20 billion to £25 billion of public money without demanding some very detailed answers. The second area of concern is the lack of ambitious targets for the restoration and recovery of nature, which need to be linked to those payments.

We know that the CAP has shaped and underpinned British farming for the past 40 years. Each of us is only one or two generations from people who grew up and managed land. Basic payments from the CAP make up between a third and a half of the average farmer’s income, and 60% of profits for average farms and 90% of profits for grazing livestock farms. They are a very, very important part of the farm business.

The CAP currently has a seven-year budget cycle, which provider farmers with the long-term certainty that they need about what they will receive, and allows them to plan and invest. We have heard from Ministers that they will match current levels of EU funding until 2022, but farmers are asking, “What next?” and the Bill provides very few answers. It fails to say how much funding there will be, whether funding security will be guaranteed and who will administer the money. Its vague list of purposes risks policy inconsistency.

My Committee has called for an agricultural policy with clear goals, but the Bill says that payments can be made for anything from “mitigating or adapting to climate change”, which is obviously very welcome, to restoring or enhancing “cultural heritage or natural heritage”—I am not entirely sure what that means or how we measure it—through to “improving the productivity of…an agricultural…activity”.

That leaves open the possibility of taxpayers incentivising intensive farming, and incentivising and paying for activities that harm the environment. We must not get into a policy pickle with the Bill.

Budgets could also be subject to the dead hand of the Treasury coming in halfway through, as we have seen with the abolition of various other environmental initiatives in other parts of the economy, so where is the Government’s accountability to farmers, the public and this place?

I am concerned that there is no obligation for people in receipt of so-called delinked payments to continue farming. Clause 7 gives the Secretary of State powers to make a lump-sum payment. As I said in an intervention, it would be possible for a farmer to quit farming and pass their farm on to their children, and for their children then to receive financial assistance under the new scheme. This sort of double accounting must not be allowed.

Clause 2 states: “Financial assistance may be given by way of grant, loan, guarantee or in any other form.”

What “any other form” are we talking about? If we cannot define it on the face of the Bill, what are we signing up to? This is the beginning of an administrative nightmare. We know that problems at the Rural Payments Agency have brought down fines under both the Labour Government and this Government. Subject to conditions, as the Secretary of State considers appropriate, we need to ensure that this money is spent responsibly and well.

I will conclude by mentioning the lack of environmental targets. We need to stop and reverse the decline in species and soil health, which we will hear a lot about in the new environment Bill. That Bill will contain the targets; this Bill contains the money. Having two Bills risks policy incoherence, so we should start with the targets and design an agricultural policy around them, if we are to meet our international obligations on soil carbon content and reversing species loss in this country.

5.18 pm

James Heappey (Welsh) (Con): When the last Agriculture Bill went through this place in 1947, we were genuinely concerned about our ability to feed ourselves. In the year that potatoes hit the ration list, food security was the core component of the legislation. Times have now changed and so have our priorities. I welcome the fact that the environment is now such an important part of this Agriculture Bill and that the public so overwhelmingly support that principle. However, food security must continue to be a factor.

Last year, the UK produced only 60% of what it needs to feed itself, compared with 74% 30 years ago. In 1947 there were 13,000 farms in Somerset. Today, just a fraction remain, but agriculture continues to be a hugely
important part of Somerset’s economy. Seventy-one years on, Brexit gives us the opportunity to reinvigorate our relationship with the UK’s farmers, and to restate the importance of the food security that they provide and their role in caring for our natural environment.

I very much welcome the Secretary of State’s commitment to articulate his vision for a green Brexit in the Bill. There is much to applaud in the way in which environmental concerns have been brought to the fore in the drafting of the Bill, and the Secretary of State and his team at DEFRA have rightly won plaudits from the green lobby for their evangelism on the environment. We have to be careful, however, that we do not superimpose a London-based, non-governmental organisation definition of environmentalism on to the country beyond. I am sure that that is not the Secretary of State’s intent, but there is a danger that we cast farmers and farming as detrimental to the environment when actually so much of the good that happens in our countryside is the work of our farmers.

It should not need to be said, but farming is a good thing—so much of the rural idyll that people picture in their minds is the product of farming—and we should not be snobby about intensive farming, provided that the right welfare and environmental standards are maintained. When farmers seek to deliver quality products at low prices through economies of scale, it is surely a good thing. Mega-farms might exist elsewhere in the UK, but farms labelled as “intensive” in Somerset probably consist of a few hundred cows being milked by two or three robots. We must not talk down those important and innovative rural businesses.

Last week, when I met farmers across my constituency to discuss the Bill, they were passionate about the landscape in their care and talked enthusiastically about the amount of wildlife on their land. Some of them farm sites of special scientific interest, where the habitats are particularly sensitive, and they do so with real love for the land in their care. It was clear, however, that how they defined what was of environmental value differed from farm to farm. For some farms in my constituency, an environmental good might be flood alleviation; for others, it might be planting woodland; and for others, it might even be rewilding. Those are undoubtedly good environmental things to do, but they would mostly happen instead of farming rather than alongside it. We must make it absolutely clear that for all the good environmental intentions, we can never judge an agriculture Bill to be successful if it reduces food production.

At the end of the day, it comes down to how we define the public good. I would argue strongly that while good stewardship and a focus on the environmental aspect is clearly a public good, so too is our sovereign capacity to feed ourselves. The key part of the Bill is the connection between subsidy and environmental good practice. While subsidy per acre is a pretty universal measure, if we are to subsidise environmental good, it will be much harder to say what is worthy of subsidy in different parts of the country. Some farms are more productive than others, so there is leeway to do things in a more environmentally focused way. Many farms in my constituency are on poorer-quality land, and margins are very tight indeed. This summer’s weather affected grass growth badly, so feed costs will be higher this winter. Our subsidy regime, while prioritising the environmental aspect, must have the flexibility and agricultural nous to respond to such pressures.

Decarbonisation grabs the headlines, but methane is a far more potent greenhouse gas than carbon dioxide, so any farming that includes livestock contributes to climate change. We must look carefully at how we help the farming industry with research and development costs to develop livestock farming methods that produce less methane. There is a drive towards veganism, but that change in consumer habits will put my constituents out of business. Surely there is a way of supporting agriculture and our environment without casting them as being at odds with each other.

5.23 pm

Trudy Harrison (Copeland) (Con): I should like to begin by putting on record my thanks to all those who have worked incredibly hard to develop the Bill. For almost 50 years, this country has been bound by the common agricultural policy, with its legislative roots in the treaty of Rome. Policy has been dictated to us by the bureaucrats in Brussels for too long. All the farmers I speak to welcome the opportunity for change and also the security of farm payments until 2022.

The Bill is a once-in-a-generation opportunity to form our own bespoke agricultural policy, allowing us to cater not to the needs of the maize growers of Poland and the citrus growers of Catalonia, but to the farmers of Cumbria, Caithness and Cornwall. I was delighted to hear the Secretary of State refer, not once but twice, to the Cumbrian Lake district in his opening speech, recognising the importance of lowland and upland farmers. This is our chance to tailor legislation to the needs of British farmers and maximise their businesses. It is key that we ensure that our agriculture sector is agile, diverse and efficient in an ever more globalised economy.

It is important to note that one key feature of the Bill is securing a new system based on paying public money for public goods. That new system will undoubtedly give one of the largest boosts to food production, environmental protection, rural public access and flood reduction that we have seen in this Parliament. Farmers will transfer their knowledge and experience from generation to generation—more so than in any other industry. Farmers know their land best. Environmental protections play a crucial role in ensuring a sustainable agricultural sector. Ultimately, it is nature that underpins our farming system, with insect pollination worth £690 million to UK farming. It is vital that we give our farmers the environmental protections they need to create an economically and environmentally sustainable food production industry.

Another critical issue related to the Bill is flood reduction measures. I am sure many Members remember the devastation caused by Storm Desmond in December 2015. While I commend the Government for investing millions of pounds in flood defences, we must not forget that one of the most effective ways of reducing a storm’s impact is to work with our farmers and riparian owners on methods such as planting riverside woodlands and increasing surface infiltration, which will also support the benefits to wildlife and their habitat. In particular, I would like to see added protection for our native species, such as the iconic red squirrel, whose habitat is being destroyed by the Forestry Commission and others.

The Bill is not limited to attaining public goods for public money, however; it also opens our eyes to the world of opportunities available to our agricultural sector.
The provision set out by the Secretary of State that allows the collection of supply chain data could unlock a huge boost in productivity, which our economy sorely needs, and allow the minimising of risk, waste and environmental harm—three things that are key for a sustainable industry.

I am so pleased that this Government recognise the value of school visits. I commend farmers in my Copeland constituency, such as farmer Kevin Holliday, who has welcomed hundreds of schoolchildren and gave me my first experience of lambing a ewe during the spring while on my roadshow of farm visits.

With Brexit on the horizon, it is time to make this significant investment in agriculture. It is time to ensure that young farmers understand the terms and conditions for their future and to enable better productivity, and it is time to back British farming.

5.27 pm

Derek Thomas (St Ives) (Con): This Bill is about how we continue farming after Brexit and the CAP, and farmers in my constituency welcome it.

The most beautiful constituency has been mentioned a few times, but I do not even need to pitch for it, because any MP who has been down to West Cornwall or even on Scilly has already decided that St Ives is the most beautiful constituency, so there is no need to persist. That is important to this debate, because if we go to the start of my constituency on the Helford river and follow the coast all the way around to Land’s End, and then right around St Ives to Hayle, in the constituency of the Minister for Agriculture, Fisheries and Food, we not only find a huge length of coast and the Isles of Scilly, but we see that every farm is a small farm.

I ask three things of the Bill: that it protect small farms, access to labour and protected status, which is important for us. As I said, my constituency has lots of small farms, and access to those farms is not conducive to the huge machinery that we have seen an enormous growth of in recent years. However we go forward after leaving the common agricultural policy, we must understand that because of the pressure on keeping food prices low and the difficulties in finding people who see a small farm as a viable future, we have seen many farmers come to the end of their working life with no option but to simply rent their land out to large contractors.

It is quite clear—this is not a criticism—that looking after the environment, the natural habitats and how these farms are organised is nowhere near as high a priority for a large contractor that needs to get a decent crop and get in and out quickly as it is for a farmer who lovingly looks after the quality of the soil, the habitat and the wildlife that lives in it. It is very important that, as we move forward, we understand the contribution that small farms make to our rural communities, our countryside and our food supply, and to the protection of our natural habitats. This is a great opportunity to get that right.

I also want to talk about protecting access to labour. In a rural constituency such as mine, which takes ages to get to, accessing labour is a real challenge. The truth is that food production in West Cornwall and on the Isles of Scilly requires foreign workers to be employed permanently, not just in seasonal jobs. I was nervous and concerned after announcements last week about how our approach to skilled labour will go forward. I have met these farmers many times since being elected, as has the Minister, and it is clear that they are keen to secure a foreign workforce not just on a seasonal basis, but to provide the labour they need. In Cornwall, where unemployment is low, it is very difficult to get the seasonal workers we need.

Finally, we need to protect our protected status. In Cornwall we have the pasty—a fantastic part of a balanced diet, I hasten to add. On Saturday I organised the great western dog walk for the third year in a row. We walked across the beach with the dogs in aid of brain tumour research and support, and we ended it with a cup of tea and a pasty, which is perfect on a blustery day. It is very important that Cornwall maintains the protected status of the pasty, alongside many other foods produced in Cornwall and the Isles of Scilly that are rightly protected. That is part of how we will maintain a good agricultural and economic policy and look after our natural environment.

5.31 pm

Victoria Prentis (Banbury) (Con): It is a great pleasure to follow my hon. Friend the Member for St Ives (Derek Thomas). He started his speech with a very controversial statement, with which I think no Member of the House agreed, but I think that everybody will agree with me when I say that British food is the best in the world, and I think that our constituents would be pleased to agree that our prices are among the lowest in Europe. Although I have no financial interest in farming, I should declare that I am a hobby farmer—a continual irritant to the many generations of my family who farm properly for money. I therefore do not have an interest to declare in the register, but I do have the soil of Oxfordshire under my fingernails.

I feel extremely strongly that we must get this right. On the day after the referendum, my first worry was for the environment. In fact, as the previous Prime Minister was resigning, apparently I was muttering something about hedgerows. Whatever else we might think of our friends in Europe, we must admit that their farming lobbies have always been extremely strong.

I am a big fan of the Secretary of State, and of course of the Farming Minister—anyone who farms South Devon must be a great farmer. The Department has certainly got the environmental message, and I have confidence in its ability to make good decisions on the future of subsidies, but I urge both Ministers to make these decisions quickly. Stability and long-term planning are really important to farmers. Farms are not just businesses; they are somewhere to live, and they often provide work for the next generation. We need as much notice as possible of the direction of travel.

Other Members have spoken about the importance of workforce planning.

Nigel Huddleston (Mid Worcestershire) (Con): Given that I represent many of my hon. Friend’s relatives who work in fruit picking in the Vale of Evesham, I had better be careful about what I say. On workforce planning, does she agree that seasonal workers play a pivotal role? Are they receiving sufficient attention?

Victoria Prentis: I will always give way to the representative of my many relations who grow soft fruit and vegetables in the Vale of Evesham—our family
The Bill focuses mainly on public money for public goods, and we are evolving from a common market. The Bill and future legislation will create a framework and support specific to the UK and the devolved Administrations. I welcome that. Like other Members, I want to see food production and farming in the Bill. Financial assistance for environmental purposes is laudable, but I believe that productive agriculture and the environment are mutually inclusive.

We have moved past the grubbing up of hedges and updated our pesticide and chemicals usage. In 30 years in agriculture—yes, it is hard to believe—I have seen leaps and bounds. I do not recognise some hon. Members’ characterisation of what farming is. We have moved a long way in 30 years. Farmers are the guardians of the land and the countryside. The longevity of that land is so important, and family farming, on whatever scale, looks to hand it on in a better state than it was received in. Upland farming must be protected by the Bill.

Part 1 of the Bill focuses on public money for public goods, encompassing the importance to rural and urban populations. I recognise that. I also take comfort from the Secretary of State’s words on food security and access to wholesome, well-produced and affordable food. I hope to see the Bill evolve.

On that point, I would like to mention schedule 3. It is very important that two SNP MPs, fellow Scottish MPs, are here. Schedule 3 is a very important provision, which relates to Wales. I hope that the Scottish Government see sense and follow Wales by being included in the Bill. There is scope to provide flexibility. Carping about a power grab fools no one: they are neglecting farmers and crofters in Scotland. They are compounding the rural payment disaster that sees Scottish farmers totally confused about payments. They still have not received their 2015 money. The Scottish Government should embrace the Bill, make provision for payments—if they do not do that here, they cannot do it in Holyrood—and work with DEFRA to add a Scotland schedule.

Deidre Brock: Specifically on the payments point, the hon. Gentleman may not have seen the press release today, which clarifies that, under proposals in the Scottish continuity Bill and the European Union (Withdrawal) Act 2018, existing European law will be rolled over, ensuring that the Scottish Government retain the legal ability to make the farm payments beyond March 2019. To suggest otherwise is inaccurate.

Colin Clark: There is the contrast: the Welsh Administration are trying to work for their farmers and the Scottish Government are politicising the deal.

Sir Patrick McLoughlin: Does my hon. Friend think that, once the Bill has gone through its parliamentary stages, the Scottish Government will complain that they do not have the powers they need?

Colin Clark: I truly hope that if SNP MPs are listening to the industry, they will introduce a schedule to the Bill as it progresses.

The north-east of Scotland is a traditional area of agriculture, with high organic matter. Leaving the EU is a massive change, but it is also a huge opportunity. I welcome the fact that the Bill addresses retiring farmers, something I am not planning to do for a long time. It is
disappointing that the Scottish Government’s right to buy has undermined the rented market in Scotland and young entrants are not getting in because there is no access. Yet again, the Scottish Government are neglecting the farming community. I hope that the Bill will encourage new entrants. I applaud my right hon. Friend the Member for Newbury (Richard Benyon), who is no longer in his place, for his recognition of young farmers.

I would like to highlight the 2016 ADAS consultation on public money for public goods. It raised a few issues of which we have to be very conscious. It recognised that Brexit is an opportunity to address these issues. It defined public goods as consumed by society as a whole, not necessarily by individual consumers. It draws a contrast between food and energy as private goods. If we create a differential, an environmental or standards cost, ADAS recognised that this could risk the competitiveness of UK producers. I would therefore like clarity from the Minister on who compensates or buys the public good when we set higher standards. It is not that I want to drop standards; I just want to understand who compensates farmers.

ADAS was very clear that moving to public money for public goods would be radical and would need testing. I welcome the fact that there is a transition period, because we have to check its efficacy during adoption. Modern productive agriculture does not have to undermine the environment; it goes hand-in-hand with the environment. Many Members have reminded us that every acre of this island and this Union has been created and shaped by agriculture in some way.

The good farmers of Gordon stand ready, with the opportunity of Brexit when we negotiate our free trade deals, to grow more malting barley for export to the rest of the world. The Bill must accommodate productive farming. I echo the words of my hon. Friend the Member for St Ives (Derek Thomas). We need access to labour for our factories, our abattoirs, our fish processing factories and our food factories. That is very important. I want to see the back of one-size-fits-all EU interference. I want to see the UK internal market protected. Most of all, I want to see a Scottish schedule in the Bill.

5.44 pm

Peter Heaton-Jones (North Devon) (Con): Let us move from north of the border to North Devon, where, I can assure you, Madam Deputy Speaker, my constituents are watching the progress of the Bill very carefully indeed. Farming is an incredibly important part of our local economy. More than 11% of workers are employed directly in the industry and, of course, that figure increases markedly when we look at all the small businesses and sole traders whose livelihoods rely directly on farming.

Let me be clear that, for us in North Devon, this is about more than just economics. Nearly three quarters of the entire land area of North Devon is farmed. To put it simply, the landscape looks as beautiful as it does because it is managed so expertly by our farmers. They are the stewards of our environment, particularly in an area such as mine with its diverse landscape, as the Secretary of State, who is not in his place, will know because he visited Exmoor over the summer to see the fantastic work being done by the Exmoor Hill Farming Network, which, under challenging circumstances, not only farms productively but looks after that national park environment.

Farming is incredibly important in North Devon, and to underline that I met more than a dozen farmers last Thursday. We had very useful and wide-ranging discussion about the Bill, and I want to thank the NFU in the south-west for arranging it. In that meeting, a series of reasoned and reasonable suggestions was put to me on how the Bill might be improved. I want to run through some of them now, but in doing so I want to make it clear that I will support the Government on Second Reading. I will not be supporting the Opposition’s amendment because, frankly, to decline to give this Bill a Second Reading would be entirely counterproductive and far more about politics than helping our farmers.

One of the main arguments made to me by the farming industry in North Devon is that the Bill needs to focus more on the fundamental purpose of farming, which is the production of food. This is an Agriculture Bill and its greatest impact will be on the industry that feeds our nation, so we must make clear that financial assistance is explicitly linked to agricultural activity. The Bill rewards farmers for public goods to deliver a cleaner and healthier environment, which is to be applauded, but the point made to me is that insufficient significance is placed on the greatest public good, which has to be the production of food in a safe way.

The reality is that financial support is absolutely critical to the survival of many of our farms. Without it, more than four in 10 of all British farms would probably make a financial loss or become economically unviable. Subsidies are crucial, and of course, historically, they have come from the EU under the common agricultural policy.

Neil Parish: My hon. Friend is my constituency neighbour, and the interesting thing about many parts of Devon, and North Devon in particular, is that it is mainly permanent pasture and grassland, so farming in the sheep trade and beef trade will keep that environment and the good tourist attraction in the area. Those things are all linked.

Peter Heaton-Jones: That is absolutely the case and that pasture is vital. I think that 51% of the farmed area of Devon is livestock grazing. It makes the county look how it does, and without financial subsidies, the farmers would not be able to undertake their important stewardship of that landscape.

The system of financial support that will replace the common agricultural policy will shape our rural economy for, frankly, generations to come, so it must be introduced cautiously, which is why I welcome the seven-year transition period and the powers in the Bill to extend it if necessary. I also welcome the fact that the Government have guaranteed the overall current level of subsidy spending until 2022—some £46 billion—but let us get the administration of the system right. There is a great deal of frustration among by farmers about the Rural Payments Agency, Natural England and the others who manage the system of payments. The system is not quite working as it should at the moment, and that is an understatement, so, please, in the new system under this Bill, let us get that right for farmers.

Public good is an integral part of the Bill and how payments will be managed. Domestic food production is in itself a public good. Importing food from other
countries is environmentally damaging, because of the distances involved. British farmers have—it says here “some of the highest”, but I am going to change that—the highest welfare and quality standards in the world. I am in favour of the move to a system of payments based on the production of public goods, the productivity of our farms and the resilience of our agricultural sector.

I have a great deal of faith in my right hon. Friend the Secretary of State, in the Minister and in the ministerial team, and I want them to give themselves more powers than the Bill provides. I want my right hon. Friend to have the same powers as the Bill gives to the Welsh Farming Minister in schedule 3, which has been talked about a great deal, and I ask that that be reviewed at a later stage.

We are leaving the EU—that decision has been made—so there is uncertainty ahead for our farmers. It is incumbent on us to end that uncertainty, and this Bill is an historic opportunity to do so. We must get the transition right. The Bill makes a good start, but I say in a supportive and helpful way that there is room for improvement. I will oppose the amendment and support the Bill on Second Reading to ensure that as proceedings on it continue, we make it the best Bill possible for North Devon farmers.

Dr Caroline Johnson (Sleaford and North Hykeham) (Con): I am a farmer’s wife and I represent Sleaford and North Hykeham, a beautiful area of rural Lincolnshire for which this Agriculture Bill is particularly important. Farmers care about the environment. They do so because they derive income from the land to support their family, and they will need to care for the land if they are to continue to work on it successfully. More than that, however, farmers love their land, they love wildlife and they love producing food. Some 96% of farms are family farms, in which one generation is merely the custodian of land that many hope future generations of their family will enjoy.

I welcome the direction of travel in the Bill, which will fairly reward the public good that farmers do, not just to mitigate any loss of revenue but in recognition of the benefits that we all derive from their care of the land. Those benefits include clean air and water, high-quality soil, a biodiverse habitat, a beautiful rural environment and much more.

I welcome the contractual nature of the new schemes and the Secretary of State’s assurance that they will be of a longer duration—five to 10 years—which will give certainty of income to farmers and duration of benefit to all. I have met the Secretary of State to discuss this in recent months, and I also welcome the widening of the GCA’s remit to include more areas of the farming sector.

The number and variety of public goods that the Secretary of State has identified is great, and I know that my constituents will look forward to benefiting from them all. However, even if the schemes are, as been said, simpler, with number and variety comes complexity for the farmer. Which scheme should they choose? For the larger farmer, who has an office full of specialists to weigh the pros and cons of each scheme, the decision will be straightforward, but for the parent and child combinations who run so many of our country’s farms, it will not be so easy. It will also be easier for a larger farmer to add a new footpath without it going past their kitchen window. It will be easier for them to identify areas of poor or marginal land to turn over to environmental schemes. I therefore ask the Secretary of State what will be done to guide farmers about which schemes they should use and what assessment he has made of how the money is likely to be distributed between large and small farms.

The transition period from the CAP to the new scheme has been set at seven years, and it will start in 2021, giving farmers nine years to adjust. I welcome the fact that the Secretary of State has listened to farmers’ concerns about the pace of change at a time of uncertainty caused by Brexit.

Finally, as a paediatrician, I am concerned about our diet and the health of our nation. Some 22% of five-year-olds and more than a third of 11-year-olds are overweight or obese. Food production is part of the definition of agriculture, and although I welcome the definition of productivity as a public good, I would be grateful if the Minister elaborated on how the Bill will secure the availability of high-quality food for my constituents. If that is to happen, food production must be profitable. How does the Minister intend to ensure that when farmers have the choice to use a given parcel of land for an environmental scheme, there is enough money for them to do so—but not so much that there is no longer any incentive to farm, reducing the availability of home-grown produce?

Overall, I welcome the Bill. I look forward to supporting its Second Reading this evening and further scrutinising the detail in Committee.

Bim Afolami (Hitchin and Harpenden) (Con): I have listened to much of the debate, and have heard a great many contributions from Members on both sides of the House—but particularly on this side—who are farmers or farmers’ wives, and who have a history of farming in this country. Unfortunately, I have none of those qualifications. What I do have, though, are some constituents who are farmers and who care deeply about the countryside and the environment. They have spent much time with me talking about the issues that they face and about the Bill, particularly over the last couple of weeks. Let me take this opportunity to mention a few of them: Ed Phillips, Tom Williams, Will Dickinson, Stuart Roberts, Jamie Burrows, Richard Pleydell-Bouverie, Paul Cherry and Ian Piggott. They, among many others, have helped me to understand how the good things in the Bill will help them in their lives as farmers over the years to come.

As I see it, there are two major aspects of the Bill for farmers and for farming in the countryside. The first is the way in which we farm, and, in particular, how we manage our land environmentally so that it continues for our children, our grandchildren, and our grandchildren’s children. We must remember that we need to enable our farmers to compete better in a domestic and international market. They have struggled at times, and continue to do so. The Bill does a lot in both those respects.

Clause 1(2) makes clear that the Government will be able to improve the productivity of individual farmers by allowing them to invest in equipment so that they can farm as effectively as possible. The Bill will also facilitate better, more efficient and more transparent supply chains, and that too will help our farmers to engage in the market. Moreover—I do not think that
Bim Afolami

this has been mentioned so far, but perhaps I missed it—the Bill will encourage collaboration among growers, to ensure that we are not subject to certain competition-law restrictions to which we are currently subject under the common agricultural policy. It will help farmers to have a stronger voice in the market, and will help to deal with the problems and distortions in the market that are generated by supermarkets and others.

We have heard a great deal in the debate so far about the way in which we farm and manage our land. That, as well as ensuring that our farmers can compete, is the thrust of the Bill. We often hear about hard Brexit, soft Brexit, Chequers, “chuck Chequers” and a no-deal Brexit, but the Bill gives us a green Brexit. That is a fundamental move that constitutes a real, positive change of direction. Not only farmers or inhabitants of the countryside in my constituency or anywhere else, but everyone in the country can be proud of that, and I commend the Minister and the Secretary of State for their work. The Bill rewards farmers for improving air and water quality, soil health, animal welfare standards and flood prevention. There are all sorts of respects in which it, and public money, will improve how we manage our land, and I think we can all commend that.

However, I urge the Minister and the Secretary of State also to keep in mind that, once the Bill is—hopefully—passed and we proceed to secondary legislation, our farmers will want to know that the Government care deeply about food production. I hope that they will continue to make clear the ways in which we care about it. I know that everyone in the House cares about it, but we need to ensure that our farmers understand that, and help them to understand how the Bill will aid their production. I also urge the Government to explain further their strategic objectives for the national security of food and water, and also to bear in mind that our farmers need to compete with producers throughout the world, often in places without our commitment to high environmental standards.

Overall, this is a good Bill. It will lead to a green Brexit, and we will have great British farms and countryside for generations to come.

Several hon. Members rose—

Madam Deputy Speaker (Dame Rosie Winterton): Order. To accommodate all Members wishing to speak, after the next speech I will reduce the time limit to four minutes.

6 pm

Simon Hoare (North Dorset) (Con): Thank you, Madam Deputy Speaker; I will give you that fiver later.

The outcome of the referendum presented us with the opportunity to sculpt for the first time in many decades our own bespoke agricultural policy, and the Department has been absolutely right to build a consensus of interest, ranging from farmers and landowners to environmental groups and other non-governmental organisations; that is absolutely pivotal. I do want to echo, however, a theme that has run through many speeches by Members on my side of the House: there is an anxiety among many farmers—particularly in my constituency, which was aptly named by Thomas Hardy as “the vale of the little dairies”, covering quite a lot of the Blackmore vale in north Dorset—that in an attempt to bring the environmental groups onside, some of the key, principal purposes of UK agriculture have been slightly underplayed.

There is an anxiety that sitting somewhere within this Bill is an idea to create, through some form of environmental public good subsidy, effectively our largest open air non-working museum, where redundant farmers will wear pastiche smocks, lean over gates, chew wheat stalks and talk to people while sipping on a glass of cider, fitting in some form of agricultural production in the few acres that we allow them after they have done all these mad rewilding schemes and other bits and bobs.

As others have mentioned, we also need to educate about the importance of agriculture and what it does to our economy, water, air quality and tourism. We live in an increasingly urbanised country with a very urban-centric media, and we should be trying to find ways through to a new agricultural support scheme of rewarding farmers who open their gates and bring people in, teaching schools and others about the importance of farming.

We must have up front and centre at the heart of the Bill food production and security; I make no apology to the Minister for repeating that. I am inclined to think that in the Secretary of State’s Oxford conference speech of January he thought food production was such an obvious aspect of agriculture that he did not mention it and instead talked about all the other environmental things. I view that as an oversight, but our farmers need to be reassured at every step and turn that food production is important. It is important for all the good things it does, and for the contribution it makes to our economy.

To those who say that food production does not matter and that we can make up the gap in domestic production through cheaper imports, which could be some sort of domestic Brexit dividend, let me point out this: those cheaper imports, potentially raised at lower standards, will only be cheap while there is a viable domestic production sector that introduces market competition. If we kill that off, then—hey presto!—the prices will go up, and will be likely to go up higher to compensate for the greater discount introduced to kill off the domestic production.

Food production is absolutely imperative, and there is no disconnect between food production and environmental farming; the two are now intensely interwoven. In all of my meetings with my farmers and the NFU, I have yet to find one—irrespective of age, I say with respect to my right hon. Friend the Member for Newbury (Richard Benyon)—who wants to go back to some pre-European system where we could grub up the hedgerows and put slurry in the watercourses and so forth.

Let me close by saying to the Minister that the mechanism for financial support to agriculture, whatever that system is, needs to be clear, simple, speedy and robust. Moreover, it needs to be regional and bespoke to address the varying types of agriculture that we have in this country. It should also provide stability, to allow investment and to put it beyond political tinkering as and when there is a change of Government. Our agricultural farmers need the certainty that the regime in place is beyond political tinkering. I note that I have the support of the shadow junior Minister, the hon. Member for Stroud (Dr Drew), on that, which I welcome.
6.5 pm

Antoinette Sandbach (Eddisbury) (Con): It is a pleasure to follow my hon. Friend the Member for North Dorset (Simon Hoare). The concerns that he has expressed on behalf of his farmers about productivity and food production are echoed in my constituency. Eddisbury’s highly productive lowland farming land is responsible for producing about 3% of the UK’s dairy products, and the chances are that that hon. Members will have used milk from Eddisbury in their coffee at some point this year. Indeed, they might well have woken up to a breakfast glass of milk from Eddisbury.

My hon. Friend the Member for Hitchin and Harpenden (Bim Afolami) talked about a green Brexit, but I would argue that that underplays the role of past Ministers and Secretaries of State. The UK has had a strong influence on previous common agricultural policies, and we have seen the EU moving towards a greater focus on the delivery of environmental goods and services—sometimes called ecosystem services. It is good to see the UK Government continuing in that direction of travel, but not at the cost of productivity and hopefully not at the cost of innovation in the farming sector.

What concerns my farmers, particularly after this summer’s experience, is market volatility and market failure. We had some of the toughest weather conditions, with a sustained period of drought. This meant that my farmers were having to feed their winter fodder to their cattle during the summer. It took a long time, but I am grateful to the Secretary of State for negotiating a derogation with the European Union in relation to field-side margins. I ask the Minister to ensure that we use the fact that we have left the common agricultural policy to ensure that we have that flexibility and fleetness of foot when there is market failure or volatility—particularly when it is caused by extreme weather events, which we are likely to see more and more due to climate change. For example, my local farmers have suggested that the hay and wild flowers growing on field-side margins that have been designated as set-aside land could be cut and used or sold for forage, thereby reducing some of the real pressures that farmers in my constituency have felt.

The second thing that farmers in Eddisbury are concerned about is fair prices. We have all heard about mineral water in supermarkets being more expensive than a pint of milk. British farmers make fantastic produce, but they want to be paid a fair price for it. I welcome the proposals in the Bill for an obligation to promote a fair contractual relationship between farmers and the first purchasers of their products. That is a really important matter for my constituents. Finally, others have mentioned workforce planning: it is really important that we have a workforce that can help to manage those farms and take their success into the future.

6.9 pm

Priti Patel (Witham) (Con): I am delighted to speak in the debate, and I broadly welcome the Bill. The sheer number of Members who have participated means that there will be a lot of scrutiny, which is of course a good thing. As an Essex MP, I have the privilege of representing a part of the country with some brilliant food producers and farmers, and some fine landscapes and environmental features. The Secretary of State will recall from his visit to Tiptree just last month, where he was hosted by Wilkin & Sons, the finest producer of jams and preserves in the world—I think he enjoyed some when he was there—that farmers across the country will judge the success of this legislation on how it enables the right kind of stewardship, not just for food and farming, but for agricultural policy going forward.

One of the biggest advantages of leaving the EU should be that we will have the freedom to establish our own regulatory frameworks for agriculture, food and farming. This is an enabling Bill, with much legislation to follow, but I welcome the Government’s commitment to ensure that every possible approach, regulation and detail both supports and promotes our farmers as well as UK agriculture, food and produce. We have the benefit of enjoying much of that produce domestically, but we also know that our farmers and those who work in the agricultural sector want to do much more to export globally and showcase their products internationally. We now have a fantastic opportunity to demonstrate that we are great producers and are ambitious to export more, so I would welcome a commitment from Ministers that there will be a strong focus on exporting and that we will do everything possible through this Bill to back exporters.

Farmers in my constituency often find themselves dealing with the costs of rearing animals to welfare standards that are higher than those in the rest of the European Union. As we have heard today, our EU membership has prevented us from blocking imports when they fail to meet our high standards, but we can now address such concerns. For example, while pig farmers in my constituency adhere to the ban on sow stalls, they know that producers in other EU countries are flouting the rules. We should get on the side of our pig farmers and bat for them on the challenges that they face. Farmers want assurances that our post-Brexit agricultural policy will not place them at a competitive disadvantage when there are lower standards across the EU.

I welcome this important Bill for so many reasons, and we now have the chance to back our farmers and to support them on animal health, welfare standards, high-quality food production and the all-important public goods that we have heard about in today’s great debate. The Bill is vital, just as it is vital, while the negotiations with the EU are ongoing, that the Government protect our agricultural sector, our farmers and our producers. We need to challenge some of the controls from Brussels that the Secretary of State mentioned earlier on.

Mr Speaker: I am grateful to the right hon. Lady for concluding her outstanding oration.

6.12 pm

Douglas Ross (Moray) (Con): Several right hon. and hon. Members have mentioned that this is the first time in over 40 years that our UK Parliament has discussed and debated UK agricultural policy. For us younger Members, it is the first time in our lifetime that this Parliament has been able to discuss such matters, which I welcome greatly. As someone who, from leaving agricultural college to being elected, had not just a job in farming but a passion for farming, this legislation is important to me.

That passion has continued in my time as the Member of Parliament for Moray, which is a rich agricultural community. Farmers from Glenlivet to Garmouth, and
from Keith to Kintessack, are extremely positive about several of the Bill’s elements, because there is a great deal to be positive about. However, what we have unfortunately heard from SNP Members throughout the debate has been doom and gloom. We heard from the hon. Member for Edinburgh North and Leith (Deidre Brock) for 20 minutes, and I would have liked her to have spoken for longer, because we heard absolutely nothing about a SNP vision for Scottish agriculture—

[Interruption.] I will come to their holding up of bits of paper in a moment.

All we got from the hon. Lady was petty political point scoring and absolutely no answers for Scottish farmers, who are looking for Scottish MPs to come down to Westminster to stand up for farming. I believe that they are getting that from Scottish Conservative Members, and I think they got that from the hon. Member for Caithness, Sutherland and Easter Ross (Jamie Stone) in his earlier intervention, but from SNP Members they got nothing but criticism. The SNP highlighted the omissions from the Bill and the failures regarding briefings, but there was nothing about what the SNP would do for agriculture in Scotland.

I really do wish that the hon. Member for Edinburgh North and Leith had spoken for a bit longer, because that would have given us more than just her holding up documents, saying that the Scottish Government are consulting. In reality, there is a vacuum in policy from this tired SNP Scottish Government. They do not have the answers. Our Scottish farmers and my Moray farmers deserve better.

I urge the SNP Members here—all three of them—to join us and start working together to set things right. Give Scottish farmers the guarantee of inclusion in the Bill while Nicola Sturgeon and her Ministers work on their own long-overdue proposals. The NFUS made it clear in its briefing for the debate that another schedule should be inserted in the Bill. Local farmers in Moray and farmers across Scotland are greatly disappointed that the SNP would rather play party politics than get around the table, work with Ministers and accept the offer that was accepted by the Welsh Government.

It is becoming more and more evident to Scottish farmers and rural Scotland in general that it is the Scottish Conservatives, not the Scottish National party, who are truly standing up for their interests. That has been clear in today’s debate. I am sorry that the hon. Member for Edinburgh North and Leith thinks that farming is a matter for her to laugh at. It is a serious matter for our constituents, and that is why so many of us are here today, trying to ensure that this important Bill is passed. I am sure it will be improved as it goes through Parliament. It is unfortunate that, time after time, the SNP simply wants to talk down what we do in agriculture in Scotland.

The opportunities contained in the Bill are the reason why it has been so warmly welcomed in my constituency and throughout the United Kingdom. With the SNP, we do not have a SNP vision for Scottish agriculture—

[Douglas Ross]

6.16 pm

Luke Graham (Ochil and South Perthshire) (Con): I welcome the introduction of the Bill by the UK Government, as do many farmers in my constituency, as well as NFU Scotland and Scottish Land & Estates, to name just a couple of organisations. As we come to the final stages of leaving the EU, the Bill offers security and a framework alongside guaranteed continued payments until 2022. I also welcome the Secretary of State’s commitment to, and action on, ensuring that the United Kingdom maintains the highest possible food and livestock welfare standards, as well as his commitments to public money for public goods, and financial assistance for “the purpose of starting, or improving the productivity of, an agricultural, horticultural or forestry activity.”

The opportunities contained in the Bill are the reason why it has been so warmly welcomed in my constituency and throughout the United Kingdom, with both Wales and Northern Ireland—unencumbered by nationalist Administrations—accepting the Government’s offer to be included. Scotland can only rely on the SNP Administration in Edinburgh to be strong for nationalism, with not one single provision for agriculture included in their recent programme for government.

To be fair, the SNP has launched a consultation on the matter—the hon. Member for Edinburgh North and Leith (Deidre Brock) held it up earlier—and I have read it. Almost all of it is just a restatement of current EU policy, with no new policy recommended, but if one reads between the lines and follows the pointed questions, one finds a lot in the consultation that agrees with the Bill. Look at some of the sections on greening, for example—questions 5, 6 and 7 talk about more productive farming, tackling climate change and improving the greening of agriculture in Scotland. Much of that is included in the Bill. I also agree with some of the consultation points—again, these are included in the Bill—about specific support for rural communities and economies. Both the consultation and the Bill are about establishing frameworks.

The briefing from the NFUS is clear: it wants Scotland included in the Bill. It wants a schedule similar to the one for Wales, with associated provisions that protect devolved Ministers’ powers to adjust for devolved policy areas while preserving the UK market. The NFUS is not alone: Scottish Land & Estates, the SRUC Scotland’s Rural College, the Countryside Alliance and many of my local farmers share that view. All afternoon, we have heard from Members from England, Wales and Scotland about how their upland farmers face challenges and how they have lessfavoured areas, just as we do. So we should be working together in this House to find the areas that we have in common, work on common policy and have a Bill that works for the entire UK. I think we can do it if we just try.

Finally, I also want to talk about young farmers and what we are doing to encourage young people into the agricultural sector. The Bill includes measures to support farmers who are planning to leave or retire from the industry, and I hope that it will also help with the transition to a new generation of farmers, through supportive grants and loans for younger people to come into farming. That should be included in the final draft of the Bill. As well as the financial incentives for younger people, there should also be incentives to encourage investment in new equipment and in innovation in agriculture.

Deidre Brock: Does the hon. Gentleman realise that until very recently Scotland was the only part of the UK that had a scheme, under the CAP, to support new or young entrants? We have supported more than 1,000 new...
and young entrants since 2015, which surely shows why we need to keep our powers over funding and policy in Scotland.

Luke Graham: That shows the gross misunderstanding here. I am not saying anything against that; I am saying that in this Bill we should encourage young farmers and work together. Why have SNP Members not put this forward? Why have they not put a schedule forward? It is because they do not believe in the United Kingdom and in Scottish farming. They just believe in nationalism and the break-up of the United Kingdom. The different parts of the UK do face different challenges in agriculture, but there are also many, many similarities. As the Bill progresses, I hope that Members from across the UK can focus on the commonalities between the different parts of the UK so that we produce a Bill that delivers for our farmers and our rural communities.

6.21 pm

Robert Courts (Witney) (Con): It is a great pleasure to follow my hon. Friend the Member for Ochil and South Perthshire (Luke Graham), who made a spirited and punchy speech that I enjoyed listening to. It is also a great honour to speak in this debate, because the last time this House considered an agriculture Bill was in 1947, when Albert Stubbbs, my great grandfather, who was the Cambridgeshire Member, spoke on Third Reading. He would entirely agree with the hon. Member for Workington (Sue Hagan) in saying that that Bill was very good. He was much respected, and is to this day, for the work he did for the agricultural workers of Cambridgeshire.

Much has changed since that day—the House of Commons is no longer sitting in the other place—but some things have not changed. The value of farming to the UK most certainly has not. It provides national self-sufficiency, a safe supply of domestic food and jobs. It also provides a high standard of welfare and environmental protection—much more so now because of the progress we have made. Much will change in the years ahead, and there are many benefits from our leaving the CAP. As is made clear from talking to the farmers of West Oxfordshire, the policy is wasteful, inefficient and environmentally damaging. It is also economically damaging, given the artificial increases in the price of food that it causes. The policy favours large landowners over small ones, and the large companies over the families, with the top 10% of recipients receiving almost 50% of CAP payments and the bottom 20% receiving just 2%. So there is a great deal to be gained from the Bill, which I warmly welcome. I am glad the Government have introduced it.

I have met my local farmers and my local NFU branch. They have raised some concerns, which I know Ministers are listening to. There are concerns about the amount of burdensome regulation and red tape, and about fair pricing and the powers of supermarkets. Above all, they would like a feeling that their high standards and the quality products they are producing are valued and respected by the Government and by Britain as a whole. I reassure them that that is very much the case, and I am sure that Ministers will do so in due course, too. My local farmers do ask that there is a focus on linking all the public goods we are discussing in connection with the Bill to agricultural products and food production, and that that is seen as a good in its own right.

I warmly recognise and welcome many of the public goods set out in the Bill. I am particularly enthusiastic about the fundamental change whereby instead of pricing and subsidy being granted simply on the basis of the size of land, a public good is attached. EU subsidies currently encourage poor land management. Under the CAP, for example, farmers lose direct payments if they plant trees on their land, because it means that they are taking land out of agricultural production, so environmental factors are not given the pre-eminence that I, and we, would like.

It is quite right that only viable farms will be able to devote the necessary time and resource for this. As the Secretary of State said, farmers will be able to go green only if they are not in the red. I would very much like to see West Oxfordshire farmers who are light years ahead of the rest of the country in terms of combining food production and environmental protection having a system that means that those goods are recommended and valued, with small farms able to succeed in the same way as large ones.

There are many more things that I would like to say but, at this stage, I will just warmly welcome the Bill. This is our first major domestic policy on agriculture for well over half a century. It gives us a chance to set forward a bold and ambitious vision, which I warmly welcome.

6.25 pm

James Cartlidge (South Suffolk) (Con): It is a great pleasure to follow the fantastic speech of my hon. Friend the Member for Witney (Robert Courts) and to have the opportunity to pay tribute to the farmers of South Suffolk who produce such good quality food and who are responsible for the stewardship of our beautiful countryside, which is the key to the quality of life in my constituency and which is shared by my constituents and those who visit from other parts of the country.

In supporting this Bill, I want to stress two key principles. The first and most important is simply this: for all the faults of the current system, our farmers are still able to produce great food and they produce it under that system. Ever since the debate started on how we should follow the CAP once we leave the European Union, I have said that whatever system comes into place, it should not come into place until it is ready and until it is better. I very much welcome a long transition; it is common sense and very much welcomed by our farmers—certainly the ones to whom I have spoken.

There is another key principle. Like many of my colleagues, I favour schemes that support public goods and environmental schemes, but they must not be at the expense of food production or food security. That point has been made by many of my colleagues.

For the rest of my speech, I want to follow in the footsteps of my right hon. Friend the Member for North Shropshire (Mr Paterson) who went off to the Swiss alps to discuss the model in use there. Switzerland is very important in all of this, because it has moved towards a system based on public goods. There are two particular points that I want to stress here. Earlier in the debate, my right hon. Friend the Member for Wokingham (John Redwood) intervened on the hon. Member for Workington (Sue Hagan) who speaks for the Opposition and asked why she thought that food imports had risen. She declined to answer, so I then intervened and suggested that it may be related to changing consumer taste. It is
interesting to note that on 23 September the Swiss held a national referendum on food sovereignty. The proposal was to adopt new, highly interventionist measures to restrict imports and so encourage more local food. In the end, against expectations, 60% voted no. That was because they were scared of higher prices and less choice.

After I made that intervention, I had a tweet from Jeremy Squirrell, a farmer in my constituency, who farms in Wattisham. He said, “Should we expect advocates all year round?” [Interruption.] The hon. Member for Stroud (Dr Drew) says, “No”. There is a debate to be had about air miles and so on, but the fact is our consumers do expect that choice, so we have to balance that against farm support.

The most important point in relation to Switzerland is on the issue on which I have had the most correspondence from constituents, which is, of course, trade deals. I have had many emails urging me not to support cutting our standards to get a trade deal. The Secretary of State said at the start of this debate that that will certainly be our position, but the key thing is that we do not need to speculate. When people say that if we accept the common rulebook we will not be able to get good trade deals, we do not need to speculate. Switzerland is effectively in the common rulebook on agri-food and goods and outside the customs union, and all the evidence shows that it negotiates very effective trade deals. In an email, I said to George Baur, assistant Secretary General of EFTA, “Do those rules limit the ability to get good fair trade deals, given that they are maintaining the standards for their farmers?” There is no evidence that they do. In fact, the most recent deal with Mexico increased trade with Switzerland by 37%. I simply say that when we seek to increase the competitiveness of our farmers, it must be on quality, not on low cost. We must produce the best food from the best farmers to the highest standards. That is the future for British farming and that is the one that I support today.

6.29 pm

Matt Warman (Boston and Skegness) (Con): No Government want any Bill to become a Christmas tree on which Back Benchers hang their hobby-horses, but if any Bill should have something to do with trees or horses, it is the Agriculture Bill. With that in mind, I will talk about three public goods that are currently part of the Bill, but not key parts.

The first matter that I want to discuss is flooding. My constituency is the most likely to flood in the country, according to the Association of British Insurers. It is also home to some of the most fertile land in the country, precisely because that land is reclaimed from the sea. Boston and Skegness is the breadbasket of Britain, and when this Bill talks of public goods we should bear it in mind that the greatest public good performed by agriculture in my constituency is flood defence. By maintaining defences, farmers operate businesses that provide livelihoods for thousands and food—genuinely in the case of my constituency—for millions. They should be rewarded for that, and the Environment Agency, the internal drainage boards and Natural England should be encouraged through this Bill to work in ever closer union, to coin a phrase, with the interests of farmers and farming so that flood defences can be secured. By the way, I hope this Bill can be used as a vehicle to bring the Rivers Authorities and Land Drainage Bill of my hon. Friend the Member for Somerton and Frome (David Warburton) to the statute book.

As we leave the EU, we should seize the opportunity to adopt new standards that allow farmers to behave in a way that is even better for productivity, wildlife and jobs. For example, in a constituency such as mine there is great discussion about borrow pits and drainage. We are not currently able even to consider what that means for local farming because of EU law. Leaving the EU allows us to have that conversation in a new way. This is not an argument for lowering the standards; it is an argument for seeing whether there are better and equivalent ways of doing things.

The second matter is productivity. My constituency, working with the nearby University of Lincoln, is home to some of the most advanced experiments in the automation of farming in the world. Silicon Valley has come to Lincolnshire to ask how it should be done. What greater public good is there than fast-forwarding that process? Innovation will allow more of my constituents to move into higher-skilled work and it should be encouraged through the Bill. There is a public good in flood defence and in fostering innovation.

Thirdly and finally, I want to mention the workforce. The Migration Advisory Committee has said that we should have a seasonal workers scheme, and I applaud that. Seasonal workers have made a profound difference to Boston and Skegness in both good and less good ways. I applaud the proposed introduction of a new scheme in a new immigration policy, partly because it is vital to the local economy. However, in that context, the public good is also in ensuring that workers who come to this country temporarily are properly housed and integrated into local communities. The Bill and its relationship with immigration and seasonal work can play a part in that, and I encourage the Secretary of State to look at that suggestion.

I thoroughly support the Bill, and I hope that the Government will show that it is an opportunity to back farmers and farming very publicly, but also to back flood defence, a responsible migration policy and innovation—in short, to seize every opportunity associated with agriculture, as well as agriculture itself.

6.33 pm

Stephen Kerr (Stirling) (Con): I welcome and support Second Reading of this important Bill. As someone who comes from a long line of people who worked on the land—mainly ploughmen—I am very grateful to see the spectacle of the past few days in Glasgow at

[James Cartlidge]
the SNP conference—not one mention of agriculture in the speech by the leader of the party and, by the way, no mention of an agriculture Bill in the SNP Government’s programme for government, which has produced very little legislation.

What we get from the SNP are carefully constructed, artificial areas for conflict so that it can progress the only agenda that matters to it—the break-up of the United Kingdom. What we see in that insurrection is simply another tactic in its campaign to bring about the tearing up of this wonderful, 300-year-old-plus, successful Union between England and Scotland.

I shall mention the other things that are missing from the Bill very quickly, as time is running out. First, I would ask the Secretary of State to include in the Bill—my friends and I will seek to include it somehow—the issue of the red-meat levy. Members will be aware that quite often the levy is imposed at the point of slaughter of cattle, sheep and pigs. It is a devolved matter, with revenues collected by Scotland, England, Wales and Northern Ireland. To cut a long story short, a lot of the cattle, sheep and pigs that are raised in Scotland are shipped across the border to England where they are slaughtered, so there is a sum of money that should go back to Scottish industry for the promotion of Scotch beef and lamb. I urge the Secretary of State to make provision for that simple change in the Bill, as it would require primary legislation. It is worth about £1.5 million for the promotion of Scotch beef and lamb.

The other thing that is missing at the moment are detailed terms of reference for the promised review of convergence payments. My friends and I wish those terms of reference to become known. Perhaps the Secretary of State can make that clear, so that we understand the terms of reference to become known. Perhaps the Secretary of State wishes to make provision for that simple change in the Bill, as it would require primary legislation. It is worth about £1.5 million for the promotion of Scotch beef and lamb.

The amount of food that the UK produces has fallen from 100% to about 60% in the past 50 years. We should encourage farmers to produce even more food to ensure that we have food security in an uncertain world. I am concerned that if we do not reward those farmers for the food that they produce we will not see the same number of livestock in our AONB, which helps with the management of the AONB.

I also have great concern with regard to the very worthy element of clause 7(7), which seeks to allow new entrants into the market. Of course I encourage new entrants and the Bill’s nod towards improved productivity, but the difficulty in my part of the UK is that our pastureland tends to be purchased by investment bankers from London who are seeking their own piece of tranquillity. Any further incentives on sale, particularly in the event that food production is not at the heart of the Bill, will mean that there is not as much incentive to farm, and those who purchase the land will not use the land for farming. I have great concern, because our landscape is already being changed by those who are not farming. We know that legislation can throw up the law of unintended consequences. If we are to have this worthy clause in the Bill, I ask that measures are taken to ensure that there is some form of disincentivising to purchase the land for those who will not farm. Otherwise, there could be an impact on my landscape.

I welcome the Bill, including the measures to reduce the administrative burden on farming. In the event that there are not more protections for food security, I ask that we go further in that regard. The farmers I speak to find it incredibly difficult that they are rewarded not on the basis of yield, but on the basis of the number of inspections they tend to have. I refer back to the 100% production post war. We did not reach that production by forced inspections of our farms. Those farmers did that because they knew how to farm. If we let farmers get on with their job they will deliver the goods, and they will also deliver the environment. Overall, I very much support the Bill.

6.41 pm

Dr David Drew (Stroud) (Lab/Co-op): It is an honour to sum up on behalf of the Opposition. I have eight minutes, so I hope Members will not mind if I do not take interventions. I have sat through every minute of this Second Reading debate, so I am well aware of the many opinions on both sides of the House. We have had contributions from 31 Conservative Back Benchers, seven Labour Members and another six Members. It has been a commendable debate.

With the benefit of hindsight, we can see why Labour states in its reasoned amendment that there should have been some element of prelegislative scrutiny. There are all sorts of reasons why the Bill will need to be improved, and we will make no apologies for playing our part constructively in the Public Bill Committee and subsequently to ensure that the Bill is worthy of the 1947 Act. That Act was the third great reforming bit of legislation after the NHS and the welfare state, which we are very proud of. For 50 years, the Act set what happened to British agriculture. It was all about security of supply and how we would have a system of tribunals and a Land Commission, but it was also about tenant farming. The one thing that has not really been talked about in enough detail is why British farming is different. It is different because we have a strong tradition of tenant farming, and Labour will maintain that. In fact, we would like to go further.
We would like to see embedded in the Bill the Tenancy Reform Industry Group reforms, about which the Minister spent a lot of time talking to various farming organisations. Like him, I support county farm estates. We would like to see younger farmers have the opportunity to be able to farm, and county farms were one way, if not the main way, in which they could do that.

In many respects, this Bill is about a funny stage, in the sense that the money—we always say “Follow the money”—is only guaranteed until 2022, or whenever this Parliament may fall. Given that the transition period starts in 2021 and will go on for seven years, it is very important that we get cross-party support, and Labour will offer its support. We will also look at the territorial issues, which are crucial. We cannot have four different systems of agriculture. That is a worry. We will do that through our links with the Welsh Government, but obviously the SNP must do what it does in Scotland, and Northern Ireland must do what it does in its own way. We must have some coherence in the way we bring forward our agriculture.

The key point, as has been said, is that the Bill is very strong on style. The Secretary of State is very strong on style, in his own way, but not so much on substance. We will table amendments to give the Bill the substance it needs.

Much has been said about the environment, but less has been said about food. We will seek to amend the Bill, with the Government’s support we hope, to make food central to the Bill. This is also about health. Despite the fact that the White Paper was entitled “Health and Harmony”, health seems to have disappeared from the agenda. We must ensure that health is brought back in, for all the reasons my hon. Friends and others have set out. “Multifunctionality” is a term that people were very keen on in the noughties, but it is crucial to the way British agriculture must now develop. We make no apology for making the link between the environment, food and the health of our nation.

We are concerned about a number of other areas. The Bill sets out many powers but very few duties. We will therefore seek to tie the Secretary of State’s hands, and the hands of subsequent Secretaries of State, so that they will have a duty to deliver an effective agricultural policy. We will look at all the details—for example, in relation to organic production. We cannot ignore Brexit, because obviously half the EU’s budget goes on the CAP, so it is a crucial part of how we consider the post-Brexit situation. We want the role of science and technology to be hardened up in the Bill, to ensure that there is a commitment to see how the future generation of agriculture can be developed.

Finally, the crucial test will be what trade deals, if any, we sign up to. The Opposition will not agree to anything that dilutes welfare standards, environmental protection or labour standards. We will be looking to see whether we can put back the Agricultural Wages Board—the Government might not agree to that—because we want to protect the quality of labour. The Secretary of State has said that he has got a new seasonal agricultural workers scheme, but it is very weak and we want to strengthen it. We want to see how we can have cross-fertilisation of labour, to ensure that we have the right people in the right places so that British agriculture can flourish. That is what we wanted in 1947 and what we achieved, heralding a whole new era of strength in British farming. We would like to work with the Government, but we also want to improve the Bill and we make no apology for saying so.

6.48 pm

The Minister for Agriculture, Fisheries and Food (George Eustice): It is a real pleasure to close this debate, in part because, as the Secretary of State set out at the start, I worked in the farming industry for 10 years and my family have farmed in Cornwall for six generations, and in part because that time spent farming and my five years as Farming Minister have shown me that the common agricultural policy is dysfunctional, frankly, and that we can do far better. The Bill creates the framework to do things better and to set a more coherent course for our policy.

As power returns to Parliament as we leave the European Union, it has been genuinely encouraging this afternoon to hear so many hon. Members take part in the debate. It shows that Parliament is ready for the task. We have heard many powerful speeches from Members with farming experience, including my hon. Friend the Member for Tiverton and Honiton (Neil Parish), for York Outer (Julian Sturdy), for North Herefordshire (Bill Wiggin), for South Dorset (Richard Drax) and for Banbury (Victoria Prentis), my right hon. Friend the Member for Newbury (Richard Benyon) and my hon. Friend the Member for Gordon (Colin Clark)—apologies to any Members I have missed out. We have also heard many other passionate speeches from hon. Members in rural constituencies who work in close partnership with farmers in their constituencies and who have championed their interests today.

The shadow Secretary of State and many others said that they did not believe that there was enough about agriculture and food in the Bill. I want to address that point. Let us start from the top. The Bill is called the Agriculture Bill. The long title says that it is a Bill to “Authorise new expenditure for certain agricultural and other purposes...to make provision about the acquisition and use of information connected with food supply chains; to confer power to respond to exceptional market conditions affecting agricultural markets;” and “to make provision for the recognition of associations of agricultural producers”. I therefore do not agree that there is nothing about food or agriculture in the Bill. What is true is that part 1 is predominantly about delivering environmental goods, but parts 2, 3, 4, 5 and 6 are predominantly about other issues that will assist farmers in their key task of producing food for the nation.

What the Bill does not envisage, however—this is true—is a long-term place for old-style subsidies of the sort that we have seen in recent decades. There are a number of key points to recognise here. First, our current area-based system is not about food production either, but is an arbitrary area payment paid to farmers regardless of what they produce. Decoupling took place some 50 years ago. The current system is not about food production. We should also recognise that some of our most successful and vibrant food-producing sectors of agriculture have never been subsidised. Look at the poultry industry, the pig industry, the horticulture industry, or fruit and veg producers. They have never had subsidies.
Our approach has therefore been to say that we should look at the underlying causes of why some farmers are dependent on the single farm payment and a subsidy. If there is a lack of fairness and transparency in the supply chain, let us bring forward provisions to address that, so that farmers can get a fair share in the value chain. If we need farmers to invest to become more competitive and reduce some of their costs, let us make available the powers to give them grants and financial support to invest in the future and in technology. If we should help new entrants into the industry and, as my right hon. Friend the Member for Newbury (Richard Benyon) pointed out, assist others who should retire to do so with dignity, let us make provision for that in the Bill, and we do.

There has been a lively discussion about the uplands. My hon. Friend the Member for Tiverton and Honiton and the hon. Member for Westmorland and Lonsdale (Tim Farron) both spoke about the precariousness of the uplands and raised questions about their financial viability. However, organisations such as the Uplands Alliance are telling us that they believe that they can create a viable and successful model based on the delivery of public goods and that if we are serious about what we say—that we want to reward farmers based on what they do for the environment—the uplands can help with flood mitigation, water quality, carbon sequestration, public access and tourism. They believe that they can do a great deal by way of public goods.

We have had a number of lively exchanges about provisions for Scotland and some powerful contributions from Scottish Conservative Members. The hon. Member for Edinburgh North and Leith (Deidre Brock) is in a slightly difficult position, because her colleagues in the Scottish Government currently have no plan. We are setting out a plan for England in this Bill. Wales has a plan, set out in schedule 3, and Northern Ireland has a plan, set out in schedule 4, and it does not even have an Administration. Scotland is alone in not having a plan.

We have been clear with the Scottish Government that we will reserve a place in the Bill to add a schedule, should they want us to on their behalf, but if they do not want to do that, they must make time in their own Parliament to introduce their own legislation.

The shadow Secretary of State raised the issue of climate change. This is explicitly provided for in clause 1(1)(d), which recognises climate change as a purpose. She also complained that this was too much of a framework Bill and that there was not enough detail, but she went on to say—that we want to reward farmers based on what they do for the environment—the uplands can help with flood mitigation, water quality, carbon sequestration, public access and tourism. They believe that they can do a great deal by way of public goods.

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Agriculture Bill
10 OCTOBER 2018
Agriculture Bill

Chapman, Jenny
Charalambous, Bambos
Cooper, Julie
Cooper, Rosie
Cooper, rh Yvette
Corbyn, rh Jeremy
Coyle, Neil
Crausby, Sir David
Craigh, Mary
Crudgas, Jon
Cryer, John
Cummins, Judith
Cunningham, Alex
Cunningham, Mr Jim
Daby, Janet
Davey, rh Sir Edward
David, Wayne
Davies, Geraint
De Cordova, Marsha
Dent Coad, Emma
Dhesi, Mr Tanmanjeet Singh
Dodds, Anneislee
Doughty, Stephen
Drew, Dr David
Dromey, Jack
Duffield, Rosie
Eagle, Ms Angela
Eagle, Maria
Edwards, Jonathan
Efford, Clive
Elliot, Julie
Ellman, Dame Louise
Elmore, Chris
Esterson, Bill
Evans, Chris
Farrelly, Paul
Farron, Tim
Field, rh Frank
Fletcher, Colleen
Flint, rh Caroline
Fovargue, Yvonne
Foxcroft, Vicky
Furniss, Gill
Gapes, Mike
Gardiner, Barry
George, Ruth
Gill, Preet Kaur
Glindon, Mary
Godsiff, Mr Roger
Goodman, Helen
Green, Kate
Greenwood, Lilian
Greenwood, Margaret
Griffith, Nia
Grogan, John
Haigh, Louise
Hamilton, Fabian
Hanson, rh David
Hardy, Emma
Harman, rh Ms Harriet
Harris, Carolyn
Hayes, Helen
Hayman, Sue
Healey, rh John
Hendrick, Sir Mark
Hepburn, Mr Stephen
Hill, Mike
Hiller, Meg
Hobhouse, Wera
Hodgson, Mrs Sharon
Holmén, 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, Helen
Jones, rh Mr Kevan
Jones, Sarah
Kane, Mike
Keeley, Barbara
Kendall, Liz
Khan, Alzaf
Kilien, Ged
Kinnock, Stephen
Kyle, Peter
Laird, Lesley
Lake, Ben
Lavery, lan
Lee, Karen
Leslie, Mr Chris
Lewin-Buck, Mrs Emma
Lewis, Clive
Lloyd, Stephen
Lloyd, Tony
Long Bailey, Rebecca
Lucas, Caroline
Lucas, Ian C.
Madders, Justin
Mahmood, Mr Khaliq
Mahmood, Shabana
Malhotra, Seema
Mann, John
Marsden, Gordon
Martin, Sandy
Maskell, Rachael
Matheson, Christian
McCabe, Steve
McCarty, Kerry
McDonagh, Siobhan
McDonald, Andy
McDonnell, rh John
McFadden, rh Mr Pat
McGovern, Alison
McInnes, Liz
McKinnell, Catherine
McMahon, Jim
McMorin, Anna
Mears, lan
Miliband, rh Edward
Moon, Mrs Madeleine
Moran, Layla
Morden, Jessica
Morgan, Stephen
Morris, Grahamie
Nandy, Lisa
Norris, Alex
O'Mara, Jared
Onasanya, Fiona
Onn, Melanie
Onwurah, Chi
Osamor, Kate
Owen, Albert
Peacock, Stephanie
Pearce, Teresa
Pennycook, Matthew
Perks, Cathy
Phillips, Jess
Phillipson, Bridget
Platt, Jo
Pollard, Luke
Pound, Stephen
Qureshi, Yasmin
Rashid, Faisal
Rayner, Angela
Reed, Mr Steve
Rees, Christina
Reeves, Ellie
Reynolds, Emma
Rimmer, Ms Marie
Rodda, Matt
Rowley, Danielle
Russell-Moyle, Lloyd
Saville Roberts, Liz
Sharma, Mr Virendra
Sheerman, Mr Barry
Sheriff, Paula
Siddiq, Tulip
Skinner, Mr Dennis
Slaughter, Andy
Smith, Eleanor
Smith, Jeff
Smith, Laura
Smith, Nick
Smith, Owen
Snell, Gareth
Sobel, Alex
Adams, Nigel
Afolami,Bin
Afriyie, Adam
Aldous, Peter
Allan, Lucy
Allen, Heidi
Amess, Sir David
Andrew, Stuart
Argar, Edward
Atkins, Victoria
Bacon, Mr Richard
Badenoch, Mrs Kemi
Baker, Mr Steve
Baldwin, Harriett
Barclay, Stephen
Baron, Mr John
Bebb, Guto
Bellingham, Sir Henry
Benyon, rh Richard
Beresford, Sir Paul
Berry, Jake
Blackman, Bob
Blunt, Crispin
Boles, Nick
Bone, Mr Peter
Bottomley, Sir Peter
Bowie, Andrew
Bradley, Ben
Bradley, rh Karen
Brady, Sir Graham
Braverman, Suella
Brereton, Jack
Bridgen, Andrew
Brine, Steve
Bruce, Fiona
Buckland, Robert
Burghart, Alex
Burns, Conor
Burton, rh Alistair
Cairns, rh Alun
Cartlidge, James
Stamer, rh Keir
Stevens, Jo
Stone, Jamie
Streeting, Wes
Stringer, Graham
Sweeney, Mr Paul
Tami, Mark
Thomas, Gareth
Thomas-Symonds, Nick
Thornberry, rh Emily
Timm, rh Stephen
Trickett, Jon
Turley, Anna
Turner, Karl
Twick, Stephen
Twist, Liz
Umunna, Chuka
Vaz, Valerie
Walker, Thelma
Watson, Tom
West, Catherine
Whitehead, Dr Alan
Williamson, Chris
Yasin, Mohammad
Zeichner, Daniel

Tellers for the Ayes:
Nic Dakin and
Thangam Debbonaire

NOES

Cash, Sir William
Chalk, Alex
Chishti, Rehman
Churchill, Jo
Clark, Colin
Clark, rh Greg
Clarke, rh Mr Kenneth
Clarke, Mr Simon
Cleverly, James
Clifton-Brown, Sir Geoffrey
Coffey, Dr Thérèse
Collins, Damian
Costa, Alberto
Courts, Robert
Cox, rh Mr Geoffrey
Crabb, rh Stephen
Crouch, Tracey
Davies, Chris
Davies, Glyn
Davies, Mims
Davies, Philip
Djanogly, Mr Jonathan
Docherty, Leo
Donelan, Michelle
Dorries, Ms Nadine
Downen, Oliver
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
Evelynn, rh Sir David
Fabricant, Michael
Falcon, rh Sir Michael
Field, rh Mark
Ford, Vicky
Agriculture Bill

Foster, Kevin
Fox, rh Dr Liam
Francois, rh Mr Mark
Frazier, Lucy
Freeman, George
Freer, Mike
Fysh, Mr Marcus
Garnier, Mark
Gauke, rh Mr David
Ghani, Ms Nusrat
Gibb, rh Nick
Glen, John
Goldsmith, Zac
Gove, rh Michael
Graham, Luke
Graham, Richard
Grant, Bill
Grant, Mrs Helen
Gray, James
Grayling, rh Chris
Green, Chris
Green, rh Damian
Greening, rh Justine
Grieve, rh Mr Dominic
Griffiths, Andrew
Gyimah, Mr Sam
Hair, Kirstene
Hallon, rh Robert
Hall, Luke
Hammond, Stephen
Hands, rh Greg
Harper, rh Mr Mark
Harrington, Richard
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
Hollobose, Mr Philip
Holloway, Adam
Huddeleston, Nigel
Hughes, Eddie
Hunt, rh Mr Jeremy
Hurd, rh Mr Nick
Jack, Mr Alister
James, Margot
Javid, rh Sajid
Jayawardena, Mr Ranil
Jenkin, Sir Bernard
Jenkins, Andrea
Jennick, Robert
Johnson, rh Boris
Johnson, Dr Caroline
Johnson, Gareth
Johnson, Joseph
Jones, Andrew
Jones, rh Mr David
Jones, Mr Marcus
Kawczynski, Daniel
Keegan, Gillian
Kennedy, Seema
Kerr, Stephen
Knight, rh Sir Greg
Knight, Julian
Kwarteng, Kwasi
Lamont, John
Lancaster, rh Mark
Latham, Mrs Pauline
Leadsom, rh Andrea
Lee, Dr Philip
Lefroy, Jeremy
Letwin, rh Sir Oliver
Lewer, Andrew
Lewis, rh Dr Julian
Lopez, Julia
Lopresti, Jack
Loughton, Tim
Mackinlay, Craig
Main, Mrs Anne
Mak, Alan
Malthouse, Kit
Mann, Scott
Masterston, Paul
Maynard, Paul
McLoughlin, rh Sir Patrick
McPartland, Stephen
McVey, rh Ms Esther
Menzies, Mark
Mercer, Johnny
Merrimam, Huw
Melcaife, Stephen
Miller, rh Mrs Maria
Mills, Nigel
Milton, rh Anne
Mitchell, rh Mr Andrew
Moore, Damien
Morgan, rh Nicky
Morris, Anne Marie
Morris, David
Morris, James
Morton, Wendy
Mundell, rh David
Murray, Mrs Sherryll
Munnison, Dr Andrew
Neill, Robert
Newton, Sarah
Nokes, rh Caroline
Norman, Jesse
O’Brien, Neil
Oford, Dr Matthew
Opperman, Guy
Parish, Neil
Patel, rh Priti
Paterson, rh Mr Owen
Pawsey, Mark
Penning, rh Sir Mike
Penrose, John
Percy, Andrew
Perry, rh Claire
Philp, Chris
Pincher, Christopher
Poulter, Dr Dan
Prentis, Victoria
Prisk, rh Mark
Pritchard, Mark
Purseglove, Tom
Quinn, Jeremy
Quince, Will
Raab, rh Dominic
Redwood, rh John
Rees-Mogg, Mr Jacob
Robertson, Mr Laurence
Robinson, Mary
Rosindell, Andrew
Ross, Douglas
Rowley, Lee
Rutley, David
Sandbach, Antoinette
Scully, Paul
Seely, Mr Bob
Selous, Andrew
Shapps, rh Grant
Sharja, Allok
Sheelbrooke, Alec
Simpson, rh Mr Keith
Skidmore, Chris
Smith, Chloe
Smith, Henry
Smith, rh Julian
Smith, Royston
Soames, rh Sir Nicholas
Souby, rh Anna
Spelman, rh Dame Caroline
Spencer, Mark
Stephenson, Andrew
Stevenson, John
Stewart, Bob
Stewart, Iain
Streeter, Mr Gary
Stride, rh Mel
Stuart, Graham
Sturdy, Julian
Sunak, Rishi
Swayne, rh Sir Desmond
Swire, rh Sir Hugo
Syms, Sir Robert
Thomas, Derek
Thomson, Ross
Throup, Maggie
Tohurston, Kelly
Tomlinson, Justin
Tomlinson, Michael
Tracey, Craig
Trevelyan, Mrs Anne-Marie
Truss, rh Elizabeth
Tugendhat, Tom
Vara, Mr Shaihesh
Walker, Mr Charles
Walker, Mr Robin
Wallace, rh Mr Ben
Warburton, David
Warman, Matt
Watling, Giles
Whately, Helen
Wheeler, Mrs Heather
Whittaker, Craig
Whittingdale, rh Mr John
Wiggins, Bill
Williamson, rh Gavin
Wood, Mike
Wragg, Mr William
Wright, rh Jeremy
Zahawi, Nadhim

Tellers for the Noes:
Amanda Milling and
Rebecca Harris

Question accordingly negatived.

Question put forthwith (Standing Order No. 62(2)), That the Bill be now read a Second time.

Question agreed to.

Bill accordingly read a Second time.

AGRICULTURE BILL (PROGRAMME)

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

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

Proceedings in Public Bill Committee

(2) Proceedings in the Public Bill Committee shall (so far as not previously concluded) be brought to a conclusion on Tuesday 20 November 2018.

(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.—(Craig Whittaker.)

Question agreed to.
AGRICULTURE BILL (MONEY)

Queen's recommendation signified.

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

That, for the purposes of any Act resulting from the Agriculture Bill, it is expedient to authorise the payment out of money provided by Parliament of:

(1) sums required by the Secretary of State for—
   (a) giving financial assistance to any person under the Act;
   (b) making delinked payments (in place of direct payments under the basic payment scheme) by virtue of the Act;
   (c) operating the public market intervention and aid for private storage mechanisms under retained direct EU legislation in response to exceptional conditions in agricultural markets;
(2) any administrative expenditure incurred by the Secretary of State by virtue of the Act; and
(3) any increase attributable to the Act in the sums payable out of money so provided by virtue of any other Act.—(Craig Whittaker.)

Question agreed to.

Business Without Debate

DELEGATED LEGISLATION (COMMITTEES)

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

Ordered,

That the Environment and Rural Affairs (Miscellaneous Revocations) Order 2018 (S.I., 2018, No. 739) be referred to a Delegated Legislation Committee.

That the Cattle Compensation (England) (Amendment) Order 2018 (S.I., 2018, No. 754) be referred to a Delegated Legislation Committee.—(Craig Whittaker.)

BUSINESS OF THE HOUSE

Ordered,

That, at the sitting on Tuesday 16 October, notwithstanding the provisions of Standing Order No. 20 (Time for taking private business), the private business set down by the Chairman of Ways and Means may be entered upon at any hour (whether before, at or after 4.00 pm) and may then be proceeded with, though opposed, for three hours, and shall then lapse if not previously disposed of.—(Craig Whittaker.)

Mr Charles Walker (Broxbourne) (Con): On a point of order, Madam Deputy Speaker. On Friday 5 October, the Department for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs issued a press release notifying me and other Members of high levels of nitrogen dioxide in their constituencies. My constituency of Broxbourne has some of the highest levels of airborne pollutants in the country, along the A10 corridor. I am extremely concerned by this because we have a highly contentious planning application for a 350,000 tonne incinerator in the north of my constituency off the A10, which will generate a further 90,000 HGV movements a year. I urge you, Madam Deputy Speaker, to advise me on how best I can bring these concerns to the attention of Ministers, because Hertfordshire County Council and Veolia now need to withdraw this planning application until we have dealt with the pollution problems in my constituency and along the A10.

Madam Deputy Speaker (Dame Rosie Winterton): I thank the hon. Gentleman for his point of order. He has rather successfully raised this issue in the House, and I am sure that those on the Treasury Bench will have heard what he had to say. Aside from that, there are obviously opportunities where he can raise the issue, such as in future business questions to ask for a debate or in departmental questions, but he has certainly raised the issue tonight.
Youth Violence

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

7.17 pm

Vicky Foxcroft (Lewisham, Deptford) (Lab): I thank those who have joined me for this extremely important debate. Reducing youth violence is an issue that I know we all care about, and even though I am a London MP this is very much a national issue. [ Interruption. ] One of my, very sad, Google alerts is knife crime. [ Interruption. ] I was reading an article where Birmingham Mail editor Marc Reeves said on “Newsnight”:

“Whatever the debate around Brexit, people are dying on the streets of Birmingham. They want to see that on the agenda for a change.” [ Interruption. ]

Madam Deputy Speaker (Dame Rosie Winterton): Order. This is an important debate, so may I ask colleagues who are having other conversations to have them outside the Chamber?

Vicky Foxcroft: Thank you, Madam Deputy Speaker, and I completely agree about the importance of this debate: this should be a No. 1 priority for us. Our young people need to feel safe; they need to know that we believe in them. They are, after all, our future: our future doctors, nurses, engineers, artists, journalists, and even our future politicians. I understand that in the Gallery this evening we have a few would-be future politicians, and I thank them for coming along this evening.

I am chair of the cross-party Youth Violence Commission and we have been examining the root causes of youth violence. In July this year we published our initial policy recommendations, in which we called for the development of a public health model to tackle violence. I am delighted that since then Sadiq Khan, Mayor of London, has announced the establishment of a London violence reduction unit, which will follow a public health approach in the capital, and last week the Home Secretary also stated that we must treat violence as an infectious disease, backing the adoption of a public health approach. But now we must turn those words into action.

Tonight, I am focusing on the important role that youth services play in tackling youth violence and on how these services fit into a successful public health approach. I have met countless organisations and down the country that do excellent work with young people, but cuts to youth services have left the sector hollowed out, inconsistent and disjointed, and it is young people who are ultimately losing out. Since 2010, at least £387 million has been cut from youth services, and more than 600 youth centres closed between 2012 and 2016. The only programme we see consistently funded is the National Citizen Service. While youth services have suffered real-terms cuts of 54% since 2011, funding for the NCS has increased annually, rising from a three-year allocation of £168 million when it was first set up to £181 million last year alone. The NCS is a two-week programme once a year. Our young people need year-round support. I wonder whether the NCS would pass the stringent criteria that many other charities have to go through when seeking funding.

Jim Shannon (Strangford) (DUP): I thank the hon. Lady for giving way; I sought her approval earlier to make an intervention. In my constituency, we have a Church-based, faith-based community organisation that has the support of Government bodies and the police. It is called Street Pastors, and it has significantly reduced antisocial behaviour and violence in my constituency. May I gently suggest to her that that might be another method of addressing the issue of youth violence and antisocial behaviour? I am more than happy to commend that organisation to her.

Vicky Foxcroft: I thank the hon. Gentleman for his intervention. He is absolutely right. Faith groups play an instrumental role in reducing youth violence. I am thinking of my own organisations, and of a local pastor called Ben Lindsay and the wonderful work that he does in Lewisham. He also gives me wonderful advice on engaging with the faith community. I absolutely agree with everything the hon. Gentleman has said.

Funding challenges have made the sector super-competitive. Local charities with similar aims have little incentive to collaborate because they are all bidding for the same pots of money. Large organisations with professional bid writers are much more likely to get funding than small charities, even if those charities are doing good work on the ground. On top of this, funding is too often allocated for short periods, and core funding is especially difficult to come by. So we are left with an environment that discourages collaboration and reinforces inconsistency.

Now, imagine we have a teenager. He has grown up in a household where he witnesses domestic violence regularly. His mother self-medicates and his father is largely absent, but when he is around he is violent. At school, he is disruptive and as he gets older he is bounced between different services. No one sticks around for particularly long and the services do not communicate with one another or share data. External involvement in this young person’s life is disjointed and inconsistent, reinforcing his belief that no one really cares about what happens to him. A young person like this is crying out for just one adult who cares, and who will stick around in their life for as long as it takes to make a difference. Research from Public Health Wales backs this up, showing that access to a trusted adult in childhood could significantly reduce the negative consequences associated with ACEs—adverse childhood experiences.

Sarah Jones (Croydon Central) (Lab): I congratulate my hon. Friend on securing this debate. As ever, she is making a powerful point, and she is an asset to this House and to all the people she is seeking to help. In Croydon, a review was undertaken of the 60 serious violence cases among young people, and a factor that affected every case was the lack of a trusted adult. Does she agree that not only have youth services been cut, but their professionalism has been massively downgraded? It is difficult to get through to hard-to-reach young people, and we should give what is an incredibly professional sector the attention that it deserves.

Vicky Foxcroft: I could not agree more with my hon. Friend, who has been doing excellent work with the all-party parliamentary group on knife crime and has worked closely with the Youth Violence Commission. I know that this issue has been close to her heart ever since she was elected.
ACEs are traumatic experiences in a young person’s life that can have massive repercussions on an individual’s life chances. People who have grown up with four or more ACEs—only 9% of the population—are 10 times more likely to be involved in violence by the time they are 18, compared with the 52% of young people who have experienced no ACEs. Sustainable relationships can go some way to reducing the negative consequences of ACEs.

Louise Haigh (Sheffield, Heeley) (Lab): I congratulate my hon. Friend not only on securing this debate, but on her incredible work since her election in 2015 on pushing this agenda, including the public health aspect. Many people bandy “public health” around and use it to mean lots of different things, but the only way it can be successful is with a truly whole-system approach, meaning that every agency, from the police to schools to youth services, should take adverse childhood experiences into account. Does she agree that that consequently means delivering a trauma-informed approach?

Vicky Foxcroft: My hon. Friend is absolutely right. We have had discussions about visiting trauma-informed schools, and we need a much bigger focus on trauma-informed approaches to understand both what they mean and the impact on young people who have experienced trauma.

Turning to some people who do understand that experience, the youth workers I have met completely understand the importance of building and maintaining relationships with the young people they work with. They know the positive impact that that can have on a young person’s life—especially a young person who may not have other adults in their life that they can rely on. They can be that positive role model. However, instead of investment in long-term, sustainable relationships, we see piecemeal interventions—little pots of money invested in short programmes.

What can we do? Well, here are a few things that the Youth Violence Commission has recommended. We should develop a national youth policy framework, which would make the provision of youth work a statutory duty. We should ensure that any adult working with young people is professionally trained, especially in recognising signs of trauma. All youth workers should be trained in the same way as social workers. Policies and practices should be evidence informed and developed, and youth workers should be recognised, supported and respected in their field. We need to build young people’s resilience, ensuring that they can cope with and bounce back from adversity. We should provide positive role models and peer mentors to raise low aspirations and self-confidence.

The youth sector is currently an unregulated marketplace. While we want to see innovation, we also want to ensure that we hold youth work to nationally recognised standards. We need a much more consistent approach, with a focus on long-term results, not short-term interventions. Youth centres need to be open access and safe spaces for young people. It should go without saying, but key to youth work is listening to the voices of young people. It should not take a genius to recognise this, but the experiences and views of young people should be at the core of and inform the delivery of youth services. When the Young Violence Commission conducted the safer lives survey, we asked young people, “If there was one thing you could change that you think would make young people safer, what would it be?” and the most popular response was the provision of more youth centres, sports clubs and other youth activities in their local areas.

I asked the Home Office to respond to this debate as well, because this is not a matter DCMS can tackle by itself, but I do have some questions I would like the Minister here to answer. Youth workers, teachers and police officers told the commission that the most dangerous time for knife attacks involving young people is between 3 pm and 6 pm—after school finishes and before parents finish work—but the Office for National Statistics, the Met police, the Mayor’s Office for Policing and Crime, city hall’s London Datastore, London ambulance dispatch data, the Centre for Crime and Justice Studies and the wonderful House of Commons Library were unable to get us data on the times at which knife attacks take place. When professionals in the field are consistently raising concerns about after-school attacks and grooming, why is this data not published? Will the Minister commit to obtaining the data and publishing it? Does she agree that after-school youth work and activities could help to keep young people safe?

I do not believe that we will ever reduce the level of violence without addressing ACEs. I worry that too many people in Parliament do not understand the impact of ACEs, although I am glad that the expertise of the right hon. Member for North Norfolk (Norman Lamb), who unfortunately is not present, informed our recommendations. Will the Minister commit to reviewing the impact of ACEs and developing a plan to reduce them? Will the Government commit to reviewing the funding model for the sector to ensure it is more collaborative and less competitive, so that we can deliver a regulated youth service that any young person can access, as and when they need it?

Many young people have said to me that they are treated like they are part of the problem when they should be at the heart of the solution. What consultations have the Government conducted with young people to find out what kind of youth provision they want? Finally, I sent the Minister a copy of the Youth Violence Commission’s interim report, and I was glad to hear that she has read our recommendations in detail. Will she commit to or comment on the parts of the report that relate to reforming youth services and the sector?

If the Government are serious about adopting a public health strategy, it is the responsibility of every Department to understand and address the root causes of violence. Youth services play a role in tackling youth violence, as do schools, councils, social workers, hospitals, mental health services, the police and every other service that touches the life of a young person. A genuine public health approach to violence must be cross-departmental and cross-party, so I hope the Minister will raise my concerns with her Department and her counterparts across Government. I look forward to hearing her response to my questions.

7.33 pm

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Digital, Culture, Media and Sport (Tracey Crouch): I thank the hon. Member for Lewisham, Deptford (Vicky Foxcroft)
for bringing this subject to the Floor of the House. I also thank Mr Speaker for granting the debate on a sensitive but important issue.

It might surprise the House to hear this ministerial confession, but I read the interim report of the Youth Violence Commission in preparation for this debate. I can honestly say, as the daughter of a social worker who spent his entire career working with children and families, that it is exactly the kind of commission that, as a Buck Bencher, I would have wanted to be a part of. The report is excellent and makes an extremely important contribution to this complex area of policy.

I know that the hon. Lady will understand that, of the recommendations outlined in the report, only those regarding youth services fall within my portfolio, so I apologise to her and to the House for not being able to go into the detail of other departmental policy areas with the same degree of confidence that I do on my own. However, I will make sure that my private office circulates her speech to colleagues who are affected by the subject. I am not sure that I can answer the questions she posed in her peroration, because they do not fall within my brief. For example, although I understand some of the connections between ACEs and youth services, the issue probably falls more squarely within the remit of colleagues at the Department for Education who deal with social services. I am also not entirely sure that the collection of data on knife attacks falls within my Department’s remit. However, those are valid and important questions to ask, so I will make sure that colleagues who may be responsible will provide her with answers.

Vicky Foxcroft: I am grateful that the Minister will raise these issues with other Departments, but part of the public health approach is about ensuring that all those different Departments work together on developing the solution.

Tracey Crouch: I am grateful to the hon. Lady for that. I am now something of an expert on cross-departmental strategies, having been the Minister responsible for the sports strategy, which involves 10 Departments, for the Office for Civil Society strategy, which involves numerous Departments, and for the forthcoming loneliness strategy, which covers nine Departments. I therefore completely appreciate and understand the important point she is making.

Although I might not know all the answers to the hon. Lady’s questions, I do know that this Government have no higher priority for young people than to keep them safe, which is why I am pleased to say that we broadly welcome the commission’s recommendations, some of which anticipated policy announcements we have since made. There is much that we can agree on: the roots to the problem of youth violence are complex and there are no quick fixes; the solution does not lie with any particular Department or single part of the community; and we need a systematic approach, backed by strong and consistent leadership. I am sure that we can all agree that the Home Secretary’s recent announcement on consulting on a new legal duty to underpin a public health approach to serious violence is welcome. That would mean that police officers, education partners, and local authority and healthcare professionals would have a new legal duty to take action and prevent violent crime. That statutory duty would make tackling serious violence a top priority for all key partners, ensuring that all agencies are working together to prevent young people being caught in the criminal cycle.

Louise Haigh: When I saw the Home Secretary’s announcement, I questioned how the situation would be any different from these people’s current responsibilities under crime and disorder reduction partnerships, which were introduced under the last Labour Government. I appreciate that this is not necessarily the Minister’s responsibility, but I would be grateful if she could elaborate somehow on how the duty would enhance existing responsibilities, which do require these people to work together to prevent crime.

Tracey Crouch: I would not dream of inadvertently misleading the House by trying to respond to a question for another Department to which I would not know the answer. However, there is a Home Office official in the Box this evening, and they will be able to provide a written response to the hon. Lady’s questions. I am sure that Home Office questions are also just around the corner.

An essential part of the approach, as the report notes, will be to address early intervention. The bit of money I am responsible for—the £90 million dormant accounts money that was recently announced—and the £200 million youth endowment fund announced by the Home Secretary will help to address this issue. I am not pretending that they will solve the issues, but both are designed to provide long-term support and learning.

The commission also calls for a reform of youth services. I agree with a number of the points in that section of the report, including the finding that funding and services are fragmented and siloed. The House might have missed it, but in early August I published the civil society strategy, within which I committed to a review of the statutory duty for local authority youth services. If, following that review, the guidance needs to be strengthened, we will do so. However, this is not all about the Government, and that was very much acknowledged in the commission’s report. We need the public, private, social and faith sectors to work much more closely at a community level.

It is really important that the House gets to celebrate the positive role that youth work can play in keeping our young people safe. I recognise, as I am sure we all do, the transformational impact that high-quality interventions can have on all young people, but especially on those who are vulnerable to exploitation or at risk of making poor life choices. We value the role that community youth organisations have in building trust between young people and the wider community. They can play an important role in signposting and facilitating access to services and overcoming barriers to engagement. It would be foolish not to acknowledge that there have been cuts to local authority youth services, but there has also been substantial innovation in new forms of delivery—not least in the hon. Lady’s home borough, where Youth First, the mutual that delivers youth services in Lewisham, has received direct funding from the Department for Digital, Culture, Media and Sport to develop its capacity.

It is also worth acknowledging the support that the Home Office is giving to the “For Jimmy” project in three schools in Deptford as part of the Safe Havens
programme. A trusted relationship with a responsible adult or peer, a safe space, and finding a “teachable moment” are key parts of the youth work approach and we support them.

Nic Dakin (Scunthorpe) (Lab): The hon. Lady is absolutely right about what she has just said, but I know that she recognises that youth services have had significant reductions in resource, which has led to a hollowing out of youth services across the country. The voluntary and community sector alone cannot fill that gap. Will she use her leadership role, which we all applaud, to make sure not only that the rhetoric is there, but that the resource is there too?

Tracey Crouch: That is the reason for the review of the statutory guidance. This is provided by local authorities, but we do recognise that there is a difference of service across England, including in London and the west midlands, both of which are areas of concern. There is also a further £40 million investment going into the #iwill fund, which supports young people to take action on the issues that they care about. One of the key points that the hon. Member for Lewisham, Deptford (Vicky Foxcroft), referred to is the work that faith groups do, especially when they work in partnership with many other different organisations.

Let me talk a bit more about the funding that is available. At present, DCMS, together with the Big Lottery Fund, is investing £40 million in the Youth Investment Fund to directly support community youth provision across England, including in London and the west midlands, both of which are areas of concern. There is also a further £40 million investment going into the #iwill fund, which supports young people to take action on the issues that they care about. One of the key points that the hon. Member for Lewisham, Deptford made in her speech was about making sure that young people themselves are engaged in the delivery of some of those services.

The hon. Lady also mentioned the National Citizen Service, whose central aim—the social mixing of young people from all kinds of backgrounds—is absolutely key. On a recent visit to a NCS programme in another south London borough, I was able to meet many of those youngsters and hear their positive experiences of NCS.

I also believe that it is worth giving some examples of exactly how DCMS funding is having an effect. Redthread, a charity with a 20-year track record in supporting young people through health and education programmes, is a really good example. Its youth violence intervention work puts key workers in hospital emergency departments so that they can engage with young people at their most vulnerable and help them to put their lives back together when they most need it. The Government are supporting the extension of this work from its London base to Nottingham and Birmingham.

The only effective solutions are proven to be the ones that connect young people to their loved ones, their neighbourhood and the wider society. There are many other recommendations in the report and I feel that my brief response just on youth services does not do them justice. However, there was one other point that was made in the report that I really want to pick up on. In the section on increasing employment opportunities, there is a reference to the shortage of black, Asian and minority ethnic role models involved in schools and youth organisations. I think we can extend that across the board, and I say to the hon. Lady that, with my other hat on—that of Sports Minister—I really share the concern that she and the other commissioners had. I have been working with sporting organisations to see how we can change that. Many youngsters look up to sports stars, whatever the sport, and we quite often use sport as an intervention programme within youth and serious violence services. If young people do not have those role models and do not see someone they can relate to, how can they ever believe that there is something out there for them and that they can achieve further? We need more BME leaders in sport from the grassroots to the top of the elite sporting pyramid. I feel very strongly about that and was pleased to see it included in that section of the report.

We recognise that there have been recent increases in murders, gun crime and knife crime, with those increases accompanied by a shift towards younger victims and perpetrators. However, statistics do not matter for a nanosecond to those caught up in the awful consequences of violence—the victim, their family and friends, and their communities—and the impact of such crimes is devastating. That was why the Government published the serious violence strategy earlier this year. The strategy represents a step change in how we think about and respond to serious violence. In particular, the strategy stresses the importance of early intervention to tackle the root causes of serious violence and provide young people with the skills and resilience to lead productive lives free from violence.

Although the causes and consequences of youth violence are often complex, effective solutions need not be. They can come from partnerships across Government, local councils, the criminal justice system, the voluntary sector and, most importantly, within communities themselves. This is the approach outlined in the interim report, and we all look forward to the commission’s final report. Until then, I shall conclude by thanking not only the hon. Lady, but the other commissioners, the advisory and academic team, the secretariat and, of course, all those who gave evidence to ensure that future policy development on this issue is considered responsibly and consistently throughout central and local government.

Question put and agreed to.

7.46 pm

House adjourned.
House of Commons

Thursday 11 October 2018

The House met at half-past Nine o’clock

PRAYERS

[Mr Speaker in the Chair]

BUSINESS BEFORE QUESTIONS

Middle Level Bill

Motion made, That the Lords amendments be now considered.

Hon. Members: Object.

Lords amendments to be considered on Tuesday 16 October at 4 pm.

Oral Answers to Questions

TRANSPORT

The Secretary of State was asked—

Electric Vehicle Infrastructure

1. Luke Graham (Ochil and South Perthshire) (Con): What steps his Department is taking to improve the availability of electric vehicle infrastructure.

Chris Grayling: I have indeed discussed, on more than one occasion, both Brexit and new generation automotive technology with the chief executive of Jaguar Land Rover. I am very excited about what it is doing on electric vehicles, and I assure the hon. Gentleman that I know of no reason why it would pull back on that investment. Indeed, I am looking forward to the Government Car Service taking delivery of its first five electric vehicles from Jaguar Land Rover in the next few days.

Mark Pawsey (Rugby) (Con): Does the Secretary of State agree that in areas where inadequate power is available in the grid for large commercial installations wishing to switch over to electric power, a battery solution, provided by companies such as Off Grid Energy Ltd in my constituency, may be the answer?

Chris Grayling: We are on the threshold of exciting developments in battery technology—I absolutely agree with my hon. Friend. We are working with National Grid to look at ways in which we can increase the capacity to key locations such as motorway service areas, but I say to him that battery technology is going to deliver some solutions we do not have at present. It is great to see businesses in the UK at the forefront of developing those technologies.

Mr Clive Betts (Sheffield South East) (Lab): Does the Secretary of State see any contradiction between the policy of trying to move motorists away from petrol and diesel vehicles to electric vehicles, and freezing fuel duty while cutting grants for electric vehicles?

Chris Grayling: We are focusing our support on electric vehicles, which are the part of the market we want to see grow the fastest. We provide substantial incentives to buyers of electric vehicles. It was great to see that, in August, 12% of the new car market was low-emission vehicles, which is a big step forward for this country.

Alan Brown (Kilmarnock and Loudoun) (SNP): Carbon emissions in Scotland have been halved since 1990, but the next part of the low-carbon transition is the electrification of Scotland’s roads. The Scottish National party Government have committed to 1,500 new charge points. Does the Secretary of State agree that Scotland needs to get its fair share of the £400 million charge fund, based on our rural nature and unique geography?

Chris Grayling: As the hon. Gentleman knows, public spending in England is always matched by a Barnett-based element of public spending in Scotland, and that will continue to be the case.

Alan Brown: That answer is completely inadequate. We should not be getting such funding based on Barnett. Scotland has two thirds of the land mass of England but got only a fifth of the broadband funding. Will the Secretary of State make sure this iniquitous position does not happen in respect of the £400 million charging fund?

Chris Grayling: This is a bit of a groundhogs day, because every time we hear SNP Members talking about the finances of Scotland, if Barnett works in their favour, they are happy to say that they insist on having
Barnett, but if they want more than that, they say Barnett is not good enough. They cannot have it both ways.

Traffic Congestion: A120

2. James Cleverly (Braintree) (Con): What steps his Department is taking to reduce congestion on the A120.

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Transport (Jesse Norman): As my hon. Friend will know, the Department has provided up to £4 million of funding to Essex County Council to support the development of proposals for improvements to the A120 between Braintree and Colchester. The council consulted on options last year and announced its favoured route in June 2018. My Department is now considering whether or not to include the scheme in the next road investment strategy, which will be published next year.

James Cleverly: The Minister will be aware that the A120 around Braintree is a road so heavily and regularly congested that my constituents regularly cut through Braintree to bypass the bypass. We welcome the money for the preferred route option, but will the Minister ensure that he will also consider any interim measure to relieve congestion?

Jesse Norman: Aware, Mr Speaker? How could I not be aware? My hon. Friend has been indefatigable; in fact, few parliamentarians in any Parliament could have matched his energy and zeal in pressing the case for the A120. He has been terrier-like in his lobbying, and he can take it from me that the Minister has been duly terrierised.

Mr Speaker: I hope that the hon. Gentleman will have that tribute framed and erected in a suitable location in his home. We look forward to an update on that in due course.

Mr Peter Bone (Wellingborough) (Con): What steps his Department has taken to ensure that he will also consider any interim measure to relieve congestion?

Mr Speaker: I am not sure how this matter relates to Northamptonshire, but I have a feeling that the hon. Gentleman is about to explain.

Mr Bone: Mr Speaker, to get to the A120 in Braintree, which a lot of my constituents want to do, they have to go down the A509, which is even more congested. The Minister has kindly given £25 million for a bypass, but the wretched South East Midlands local enterprise partnership quango is blocking it. Will he get together with me to knock some heads together and get the bypass sorted out so that we can get to Braintree on the A120?

Jesse Norman: I am frightened and worried to think that that may be the only use for the new road; if that is in fact the case, perhaps we should reconsider the investment case. My hon. Friend can take it from me that the Department for Transport has been following the issue very closely. It is entirely a matter for SEMLEP and Northamptonshire County Council, but I am happy to meet my hon. Friend to discuss the matter further.

Leaving the EU: Perishable Scottish Food

3. Jamie Stone (Caithness, Sutherland and Easter Ross) (LD): What discussions he has had with the Scottish Government on the transportation of perishable Scottish food abroad after the UK leaves the EU.

The Secretary of State for Transport (Chris Grayling): My Department has regular discussions with Scottish Government officials and has discussed this issue with them. We are well aware of the importance of rapid transit for perishable goods. I should reiterate that we are of course committed to securing a deal that works for the entire United Kingdom—Wales, Scotland, Northern Ireland and England. Having thought back to events earlier this summer, I should also say that the biggest conduit for perishable Scottish produce is of course Heathrow airport, from where Scottish smoked salmon is carried around the world. That makes it all the more sad that the Scottish National party chose to vote against the expansion of Heathrow, which will be good for Scotland.

Jamie Stone: I thank the Secretary of State for his answer, which was interesting and helpful. It is obvious that most Scottish perishable food products have to pass through England to reach the export markets. Does the Secretary of State agree that it would be best if all the laws in Scotland and in the rest of the UK that might affect the movement and export of such products were brought into harmonisation? Any misalignment of laws would be unhelpful to the export of Scottish food products. Will he press this matter with the Scottish Government whenever he can?

Chris Grayling: I am slightly puzzled, because the harmonisation of laws would imply backing away from devolution. The reality is that in a devolved settlement, as we have with Scotland, there will always be some differences. Nevertheless, we and the Scottish Government must always work together in the interests of the whole United Kingdom and of producers throughout the whole United Kingdom.

Lilian Greenwood (Nottingham South) (Lab): Air transport is obviously vital for Scottish food producers, as it is for businesses and people throughout the UK. In October 2016, the Secretary of State told the Transport Committee that future aviation arrangements would form part of the Brexit negotiations “in the next few months” and would be handled by the Department for Exiting the European Union. A year later, with no evidence of progress, the Secretary of State assured the Committee that there was no danger of planes being grounded by a no-deal Brexit. A year on, it is clear from the Government’s own technical notices that that is a real possibility. Who in the Government is handling this matter? What progress has been made? What confidence can people have when booking flights? How can we reach any conclusion other than that this matter has been badly mishandled?

Chris Grayling: I am sorry, but the hon. Lady has got this completely wrong. The Government have said or done nothing to imply that planes will be grounded and
there will be no flights after we leave the European Union. I give the House the categorical assurance that flights are going to continue. Interestingly, those in the aviation industry who have been most vociferous about the risk of planes being grounded are now selling tickets for next summer and expanding the number of routes from the United Kingdom to the European Union next summer.

**Douglas Chapman** (Dunfermline and West Fife) (SNP): Post austerity and post Brexit, what additional funding might be used by the Government to invest in Scottish ports so as to allow more exports into Europe, our main market for food and drink?

**Chris Grayling**: Well, of course, a number of the Scottish ports are trust ports. I have been to the port in Montrose. I am very keen to see ports like that expand and I am working with a local Member of Parliament—a fantastic new Conservative Member of Parliament—to ensure that we provide the support and the opportunities for such ports to grow and develop.

**Railway Infrastructure**

4. **Kelvin Hopkins** (Luton North) (Ind): What recent assessment he has made of trends in the cost of railway infrastructure; and if he will make a statement. [906915]

**The Minister of State, Department for Transport** (Joseph Johnson): Information on trends in infrastructure costs on the railways are published by the Office of Road and Rail in its UK rail industry financial report, which is found on its website. Spending by Network Rail was £7.3 billion in 2016-17, an increase of half a billion pounds, or 7% in real terms, on the previous year.

**Kelvin Hopkins**: Since rail privatisation, the costs of rail infrastructure works have gone through the roof, multiplying several times. The Minister may have seen a recently published analysis showing that electrification, for example, now costs seven times more in real terms—stripping out inflation—than when British Rail electrified the east coast main line. Is it not obvious that we should not only nationalise train operations, but rebuild publicly owned in-house works capacity and save billions for the public purse and for passengers?

**Joseph Johnson**: I remind the hon. Gentleman that Network Rail is responsible for most railway infrastructure work in this country and it is, of course, in the public sector. He rightly highlights the need for Government to ensure that they get the greatest possible efficiency and value for money from all our infrastructure investments. That is why we have set up a mechanism to benchmark costs across the industry in the most rigorous way possible so that we get full value for money from the record sums that we are investing in our railways—£48 billion over the next five-year period.

**Andrew Bridgen** (North West Leicestershire) (Con): Despite being the centre of population of our country, my seat has no railway station. I have been campaigning for many years for the opening of the Ivanhoe line between Burton-on-Trent and Leicester to aid further economic growth and reduce road congestion. Does the Minister agree that it is better to spend money on these local deliverable projects to improve people's lives than on national white elephant projects with huge runaway budgets?

**Joseph Johnson**: Of course, we need to invest in transformative schemes such as HS2 and Crossrail, which are going to change connectivity for the better, but we can do everything. We can invest also in the smaller schemes, which will deliver valuable change to local communities.

**Chris Elmore** (Ogmore) (Lab): The Minister will be aware of my ongoing campaign to close the Pencoed level crossing in my constituency. When he met me, he said that Network Rail had not prioritised the closure, but Network Rail tells me that the scheme costs so much that it would require additional funding from the UK Government. I am meeting representatives of Network Rail again tomorrow, so can he say now, ahead of my meeting, that Ministers in the DFT will give additional funding to close the level crossing?

**Joseph Johnson**: We take the issue of safety at level crossings exceptionally seriously. This is an area that the Department, alongside Network Rail, is looking at closely, and I look forward to receiving an update from Network Rail following the hon. Gentleman's meeting with its representatives tomorrow.

**Stephen Crabb** (Preseli Pembrokeshire) (Con): The Great Western electrification project has become a case study in weak project planning and control, so will my hon. Friend work closely with the Railway Industry Association on its electrification cost challenge to help drive down the costs of these projects with a view to looking again particularly at the south Wales bit of that project, because electrification of all the main lines must remain a long-term ambition for our railways.

**Joseph Johnson**: I share my right hon. Friend's concerns in that respect. That is why the Department has asked the industry to come together in the transport infrastructure efficiency strategy, which was launched last year and which will benchmark costs, including in electrification, so that we get the greatest possible value for the money that we are investing in our railways.

**Meg Hillier** (Hackney South and Shoreditch) (Lab/Co-op): We have seen Crossrail delayed at great cost, a failure in electrification and many question marks over HS2. Will the Minister's Department get a real grip on the cost and delivery of decent rail infrastructure in this country?

**Joseph Johnson**: We are investing £48 billion in these projects over the next five-year period. It is vital that we get value for money. Obviously, it is disappointing that Crossrail, which is a 100% subsidiary of Transport for London, told the Department that it needed to revise the delivery schedule for phase three of the project. We are disappointed by the news and want that phase completed as rapidly as possible.

**East Midlands Trains**: Sheffield to London

5. **Paul Blomfield** (Sheffield Central) (Lab): What discussions he has had with East Midlands Trains on improving the timetable for the Sheffield to London service. [906916]
The Minister of State, Department for Transport (Joseph Johnson): We are investing in the biggest upgrade of the midland main line since it was completed in 1870. The upgrade will reduce journey times between Nottingham and Sheffield and London by up to 20 minutes in the peak once it is complete.

Paul Blomfield: I thank the Minister for that response, but it misses the immediate point. The May timetable changes mean that we have no direct rail services from London to Sheffield between the peak afternoon hours of 16.47 and 18.02, where previously there were three. These services have been sacrificed to improve Gavia Thameslink services for London and the south-east. Does the Minister think that that is acceptable? If not, what is he going to do about it?

Joseph Johnson: We recognise the challenges of integrating the £7 billion Thameslink programme with the ambitious upgrade of the midland main line costing over £1 billion. That did require hard choices regarding the rationalisation of services, but the situation will be resolved from 2020 onwards with the completion of the upgrade of the midland main line, which will add capacity to the route.

Mr Philip Hollobone (Kettering) (Con): All the trains from London to Sheffield have to go through Kettering, but sadly not enough of them stop at Kettering. We used to have a half-hourly service northbound from Kettering, but the last Labour Government cut that to one an hour. Will the rail Minister reinstate the half-hourly service?

Joseph Johnson: In the consultation on the next east midlands franchise, we have proposed that the extra capacity to be delivered on the midland main line is used to provide 50% more seats in the peak on the last direct service between Corby, Kettering, Wellingborough, Bedford, Luton, Luton Airport Parkway and London St Pancras. This will mean longer, quieter, more comfortable and more efficient trains.

Stephanie Peacock (Barnsley East) (Lab): It costs over £150 a month to commute to Leeds and Sheffield from Barnsley, yet the trains—which belong in museums—are often delayed and packed to a dangerous capacity. When will the Government get a grip and invest in northern transport?

Joseph Johnson: We are investing in new rolling stock, not just across the north of England with all trains there being either replaced or fully refurbished, but also on the midland main line, where new trains will be coming in from 2022 onwards. These will be efficient, environmentally friendly, bi-mode trains of the most innovative kind anywhere in Europe.

Rail User Numbers

6. Alex Norris (Nottingham North) (Lab/Co-op): What steps is he taking in response to the reduction in passenger numbers across Great Britain between 2004 and 2014, averaging at about 5% growth every year, journey growth slowed to under 1% in 2016-17 and fell by around 3% in 2017-18. However, there was growth of about 3% in passenger numbers in the first quarter of 2018-19.

Alex Norris: Since 2010, fares have risen at double the rate of wages. What assurances can Ministers give me that there will not be a reduction in rail usage from poorer communities such as mine as people are increasingly priced out?

Joseph Johnson: Passenger numbers have more than doubled in the period of privatised operation of fares. This has happened in an environment in which the Government have frozen fares in real terms for the past six years, and we will be doing so again for the coming financial year. Fares rose by 20% in real terms under the Labour Government. By contrast, they have risen by 2% in the period since 2010.

Sir Patrick McLoughlin (Derbyshire Dales) (Con): In last year’s budget, the Chancellor announced a new railcard for those aged 26 to 30, giving 4.5 million more young people a third off their rail fares. Would that increase the number of people using the trains, and what has happened to that scheme?

Joseph Johnson: It is quite possible that it would lead to such an increase. This is an exciting, industry-led trial of the 26-to-30 railcard that the Chancellor announced in his Budget last year. We are waiting the full assessment of that trial, and further steps will be announced in due course.

Kate Green (Stretford and Urmston) (Lab): Every week I am contacted by constituents who are giving up travelling to work by train because of the appalling service that they have received from Northern rail. When are Ministers going to get a grip of—or preferably scrap—that failing franchise?

Joseph Johnson: At the request of Transport for the North in one of its recent board meetings, we have jointly appointed Richard George, who previously played an important role in the delivery of the London Olympic games, to co-ordinate better the performance of the train operators in the north of England—Northern and TransPennine Express—alongside Network Rail. We are looking forward to seeing the results of his work. I met him yesterday, and he has a hard-driving agenda.

Alec Shelbrooke (Elmet and Rothwell) (Con): I have just heard the answer that my hon. Friend has given, but this morning, as most mornings at my constituency station of Woodlesford, 40 people could not get on the 7.41 train. Numbers are reducing because quite frankly people cannot get in the damn carriage. What pressure is my hon. Friend putting on Northern and Network Rail to get the new rolling stock over to my constituents’ service so that they can get on the train?

Joseph Johnson: I can tell my hon. Friend that new rolling stock is starting to be delivered right now. Improving performance on Northern is a priority. It has been improving significantly since the difficulties over the
summer, but there is always room for further progress. The Department will hold it and its owner Arriva to account for their performance in the coming months.

Mr Gregory Campbell (East Londonderry) (DUP): In discussions with the devolved legislatures, will the Minister ensure that the promotion of rail travel, especially for the elderly, in rural areas right across the United Kingdom is put at the forefront of the minds of Translink in Northern Ireland and the other providers across Great Britain?

Joseph Johnson: That is an important consideration, and the Department gives it great attention. We want to ensure that rail is accessible to all communities. The hon. Gentleman makes a very important point.

CAREERS AT SEA

7. Royston Smith (Southampton, Itchen) (Con): What steps his Department is taking to promote a career at sea to young people. [906918]

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Transport (Ms Nusrat Ghani): The Department supports a number of initiatives promoting careers at sea and on land in the maritime sector, including Seafarers Awareness Week, Maritime UK’s maritime careers forum, the Women In Maritime Taskforce and the Year Of Engineering. To increase cadetships, the SMaRT budget is being doubled to £30 million, and the Government continue to support the sector in developing maritime apprenticeships.

Royston Smith (Southampton, Itchen) (Con): Southampton is one of the busiest ports in the country, and the UK’s No. 1 export port. There are many opportunities in the marine and maritime sector in addition to a life at sea, and if our ports are to continue to thrive beyond Brexit, we will have to attract the brightest and best of the industry. What plans does my hon. Friend have to promote opportunities in the wider marine and maritime sector?

Ms Ghani: My hon. Friend, like me, is a champion of Southampton port and of increasing the seafaring population. Ports such as Southampton have a key job to do in accessing our global markets. We support a range of initiatives promoting careers at sea and on land in the maritime sector. We have developed maritime apprenticeships and doubled the SMaRT budget to £30 million to increase cadetships, and we support a wide range of campaigns such as seafarers awareness week and a campaign that I launched myself—Women in the Maritime Task Force—to increase the current pitiful 3% of maritime jobs held by women.

Mr Alistair Carmichael (Orkney and Shetland) (LD): One thing that would bring young people into the industry is decent wages. The Scottish Government recently commissioned a survey of the extra freight service from Aberdeen to Lerwick. I am told by RMT officials that the operators may be paying as little as £3.78 per hour. That is something that the Scottish Government should not be allowing, but it would not be an option if the Minister implemented the legal working group recommendations that she received earlier this year without any further delay.

Ms Ghani: I recently met the RMT to discuss a number of issues, including the national minimum wage, which I am keen to explore, working with the Department for Business, Energy and Industrial Strategy. The right hon. Gentleman is right. We need to ensure that people are paid and dealt with appropriately and work in comfortable circumstances, whether at sea or on shore.

Karl Turner (Kingston upon Hull East) (Lab): It is scandalous that British officers and ratings hold fewer than 20% of jobs on UK vessels, while the shipping companies reap the benefits from the tonnage tax. Does the Minister agree that we need to create a mandatory link to training and employment of British seafarers, including ratings, as other EU countries have?

Ms Ghani: The tonnage tax enables us to have six types of apprenticeship, and it encourages companies to employ UK ratings as well. We are doing everything we can, whether it is on ports or working with our ship owners, to ensure that every opportunity is available for young people to enter the maritime sector as a career.

Karl Turner: There is no link for ratings. It is not true.

Mr Speaker: Order. The hon. Gentleman, I can see, is in what I would call good chuntering form. His favourite sport is to chunter from a sedentary position. [Interruption.] I am grateful to be advised of the hon. Gentleman’s opinions from his seat as well as when he is on his feet.

ELECTRIC VEHICLES

8. Mr John Hayes (South Holland and The Deepings) (Con): What steps his Department is taking to support the transition to electric vehicles. [906920]

The Secretary of State for Transport (Chris Grayling): It is always a pleasure to answer a question from such a distinguished former Transport Minister. I know that my right hon. Friend will be excited by the progress we are making with the Road to Zero strategy. Our ambition is for all new cars and vans to be effectively zero-emission by 2040, supported by a package of demand, supply and infrastructure measures and £1.5 billion of funding. He will also be interested to know that we hosted in Birmingham recently the world’s first international zero-emission vehicle summit, which was attended by countries from all around the world.

Mr Hayes: Mr Speaker, you know, and the Secretary of State does too, that in my time as Minister of State I sought to electrify the Department, this House and our country. To make the future electric, we need charging infrastructure sufficient to build confidence in those who, unlike the liberal bourgeoisie, do not have space to charge vehicles at home. Will the Secretary of State set out plans for how we will have widespread on-street charging infrastructure that is accessible, recognisable by its beauty and has a common payment method? I say that not to guarantee my own political legacy, but in the national interest and for the common good.

Chris Grayling: None the less, Mr Speaker, you will recall that in the debates in Committee on the Automated and Electric Vehicles Bill, such infrastructure became affectionately known as “Hayes hook-ups”, and we

expect to see them spreading round the country shortly. Quite apart from the work we are doing with local authorities to ensure, for example, that lamp post installations contain the facility for on-street charging, what is particularly exciting is the progress being made towards high-speed, high-voltage charging, which I think within a relatively short number of years will lead to the ability to charge a vehicle in under 10 minutes. That is when we will see the breakthroughs that spread electric vehicles all across our society.

Mr Barry Sheerman (Huddersfield) (Lab/Co-op): Can I offer the Secretary of State a really good opportunity for a win on electric vehicles? The biggest fleets in our country are the waste trucks that pick up waste from every house in every street in every part of our country every week, and they are polluting vehicles. This is a great opportunity. Dennis Eagle, a British manufacturer, is now producing a battery-operated waste truck. If we could get electric trucks to pick up the waste in this country, we would have a fantastic decline in pollution in our cities.

Chris Grayling: I absolutely agree with the hon. Gentleman. The roads Minister, my hon. Friend the Member for Hereford and South Herefordshire (Jesse Norman), is already working with manufacturers on transforming the local delivery fleet network, but we will certainly take on board the hon. Gentleman’s suggestion. I was not aware that that vehicle had been produced. If we are going to meet air quality challenges, we need to make the kind of change he describes.

Alex Burghart (Brentwood and Ongar) (Con): One of the great prizes of the electric vehicle revolution will be autonomous vehicles, but for them to bring all the great advantages they can bring to all of us, and particularly disabled people, we need to have public trust in that technology. What is the Department doing to establish that public trust?

Chris Grayling: A number of trials are taking place around the country, which are paving the way for this revolution. I pay particular tribute to Andy Street, the Mayor of Birmingham, who is working with the industry in the west midlands—the heart of our automotive industry—on on-street trials on all kinds of roads there. This revolution is going to transform lives. It is going to create real opportunities for people with disabilities and the elderly. We are a way away from an automated vehicle being able to go up and down a single-track road with passing spaces, but the reality is that in and around our major towns and cities, this revolution is going to start happening very soon.

Jim Shannon (Strangford) (DUP): Electric vehicles need to be dependable. Can the Secretary of State outline what consumer protection and consumer care will be in place for those with electric vehicles who have an issue with charging that leaves them stranded? I am aware of that happening.

Chris Grayling: It sounds as though the hon. Gentleman and I had better have a conversation about that, so that we can look at specific cases. It is clearly important that consumers with electric vehicles have the benefits of the same consumer protections as any other kind of vehicle driver.

Civil Aviation Noise

9. Andrew Rosindell (Romford) (Con): What progress his Department has made on reducing the level of civil aviation noise.

The Secretary of State for Transport (Chris Grayling): We have set a policy framework which expects industry to manage and provide mitigation for aviation noise. Within this, the overall level of civil aviation noise in the UK continues to decrease. Last October, I introduced a suite of new policies which enhance the way the impact of noise on communities is assessed in airspace changes. At the same time, I announced the establishment of an Independent Commission on Civil Aviation Noise. Through the development of our new aviation strategy, we are now looking also at the regulatory framework, to make sure we have the right protection in place for local communities.

Andrew Rosindell: The Secretary of State will be aware that complaints about London City airport have gone up dramatically since the introduction of the new concentrated flightpaths. Although quieter aeroplane engines are welcome, will he do all he can to ensure that there is a fairer spread of flightpaths along the east Thames corridor, particularly affecting my constituents in Romford, Hornchurch and the whole London Borough of Havering?

Chris Grayling: This is a very important issue, and one that my Department and the Civil Aviation Authority are reviewing carefully. Notwithstanding the work needed in the shorter term to address noise from City airport, I believe that the outcome of our airspace modernisation programme, using new technology to manage airspace, will enable us to manage the impacts on communities much better and make a real difference.

Ruth Cadbury (Brentford and Isleworth) (Lab): Yesterday, the World Health Organisation issued new, tighter guidelines on noise. Given that about 1.5 million people in London and the south-east already live within the 45 dB Lden noise contour, where the WHO now says there are adverse health impacts, will the Government reassess their approach to Heathrow expansion?

Chris Grayling: It is important to recognise that the change in technology—the arrival of a new generation of lower noise, lower emission and lower fuel-consuming aircraft—will transform the environment around Heathrow and all our airports. One just has to listen to a Boeing 747 landing at Heathrow compared with, for example, one of the new Airbus or Boeing aeroplanes to realise the huge difference. As the older aeroplanes are phased out, I expect noise at all airports will be reduced, and that is a good thing.

Access for All Programme

10. Bob Blackman (Harrow East) (Con): What progress has been made on implementing the Access for All programme.

Chris Grayling: This is a very important programme, and I had better have a conversation about that, so that we can look at specific cases. It is clearly important that...
Bob Blackman: I thank my hon. Friend for that answer. For disabled people, particularly wheelchair users, having decent access to public transport is the difference between being able to work and get out and being confined to their home. Does she agree that the Mayor of London should match this exciting scheme, so that we can get Transport for London to implement proper access to Stanmore, Canons Park, Queensbury and Harrow & Wealdstone stations in my constituency?

Ms Ghani: My hon. Friend is right: if the Mayor of London spent as much time fixing the tube station as he did promoting himself at the station, it would be far more accessible. As my hon. Friend is aware, transport in London is devolved to the Mayor and delivered by Transport for London, so it is for the Mayor to determine his accessibility policy and the provision of step-free access at individual stations.

Mohammad Yasin (Bedford) (Lab): There is no step-free access at Bedford station while much needed repairs are made to the lifts, but passengers were not informed until days before of the severe disruption to their journeys. Govia Thameslink Railway is already facing potential fines for not keeping passengers informed. Does the Minister agree that no lessons have been learned from the chaos over the summer?

Ms Ghani: Bedford station is, I believe, fitted for step-free access. It is unfortunate that the lifts are broken and that they have not been repaired quickly. Hopefully, the hon. Gentleman raising the matter today will alert Govia Thameslink Railway to the need to get their act into gear. I know that taxis are available for passengers who need the service, but the lifts should be fixed.

Gill Furniss (Sheffield, Brightside and Hillsborough) (Lab): Government cuts have forced local authority bus budgets in England and Wales to be cut by more than £20 million last year. Services such as the No. 3 bus in Wincobank in my constituency have been reduced, affecting the elderly and those with mobility issues. What are the Government doing to ensure the provision of sustainable and accessible public transport in areas such as my constituency, particularly in view of the Prime Minister’s announcement that austerity is now over?

Ms Ghani: Budgets to support our buses are helping bus services up and down the country, and patronages are changing depending on where people are in the country. The hon. Lady is right to say that disabled people tend to take buses more than other forms of transport, but if local authorities work closely with bus operating companies they can increase access and patronage. In areas such as Liverpool, Bristol and South Gloucestershire, patronages have gone up. Bus companies can do a lot to ensure more accessibility, from using technology to ensuring that the buses themselves are more accessible.

Road Transport Emissions

11. Graham P. Jones (Hyndburn) (Lab): What steps he is taking to reduce harmful emissions from road transport.

Jesse Norman: As the hon. Gentleman will know, the Government’s mission is for all new cars and vans to be effectively zero emission by 2040. The Road to Zero strategy, which we published in July, sets out a wide range of actions that have been taken to achieve that goal, as well as steps to drive down emissions from conventional vehicles in the meantime. Those measures involve about £1.5 billion of investment.

Graham P. Jones: The recent National Infrastructure Commission report identified Accrington as the most congested town in the country. Has the Minister read that report, and does he recognise that fact? Will he meet my local authority to try to find a resolution, and what outcome to that problem would he like to see?

Jesse Norman: Yes I have—not only have I read the report, but I have talked to Sir John Armitt, head of the National Infrastructure Commission, about the implications of the work it is doing. I would be delighted to meet the hon. Gentleman. This is the first I have heard about the issue from him, but if he wants to come and bring with him representatives from his local authority, he is welcome to have that conversation.

Andy McDonald (Middlesbrough) (Lab): This month’s United Nations climate change report offers a chilling glimpse of the apocalypse of drought, flooding and human displacement that we face should global warming not be restricted to 1.5 °C. Given the contribution made by road transport to the UK’s greenhouse emissions, was the Prime Minister’s boast yesterday that fuel duty has been frozen for seven years, at a cost of £46 billion, ill-judged? Has the Secretary of State failed to provide the leadership necessary for the road transport sector to play its full part in reducing emissions?

Jesse Norman: I will leave the Secretary of State to answer for himself in future questions and conversations, but there cannot be much doubt that the goal is to balance the effective use of all modes of transport with the important need to make a transition to low emissions as fast as possible. We are doing so at a great pace, and the hon. Gentleman will be aware of the many decisions that have been taken about improving air quality across the country, of the zero emission vehicle summit that we held in September, and of the Birmingham declaration that was world-leading in bringing other countries to the table.

Andy McDonald: The reality is that the policies of this Government have directly increased harmful emissions from road transport. Bus funding has been slashed, plug-in car grants cut, and there is chaos in the transition to electric motor vehicles and trains. Will the Secretary of State wake up and accept that he cannot continue to crawl along in the slow lane when it comes to tackling climate change?
Jesse Norman: I apologise for being the same person that I was when I answered the previous question and not the Secretary of State, but let me pick up on the hon. Gentleman’s points. In August, 12½% of new vehicles were electric, and that is because electric vehicles are beginning a fast S-curve of take-up. They have been heavily supported by this Government, and they will continue to be so supported.

Sexual Assaults: Railways

12. Justin Madders (Ellesmere Port and Neston) (Lab): What recent steps he has taken to reduce the number of sexual assaults and public order offences on the railways.

The Minister of State, Department for Transport (Joseph Johnson): The Department and the British Transport police are committed to tackling crime and antisocial behaviour. The BTP takes sexual offences exceptionally seriously and has been encouraging people who experience harassment or assault of a sexual nature to report their experiences under the Project Guardian programme and the “Report it to stop it” campaign.

Justin Madders: My constituent’s son was travelling down from school on the Wrexham to Bidston line, and was waiting at Upton station when he was attacked by a group of youths. The station is unmanned, and my constituent was horrified to find out that there is no CCTV. What can be done to ensure better security at unmanned stations?

Joseph Johnson: The son of the hon. Gentleman’s constituent clearly had a terrible experience, and our sympathies go out to him. The Department is working closely with train operating companies on the Secure Stations Scheme, to give more stations across the network accredited status. CCTV will have an important role to play in stations, just as it does in the new rolling stock that we are introducing across the country. I remind Opposition Members that we want more staff working on our railways, not fewer, and for operators where there have been disputes relating to staffing levels, such as Southern and South Western Railway, that is indeed the case.

Rachael Maskell: Public order offences also rose by 116% over the same time period. A staggering 11,711 violent crime offences were committed just last year, with a total of 61,159 criminal offences in 2017-18, again hitting record highs. As we know, the presence of people in authority reduces the prevalence of crime, so can the Minister tell the House why he supports removing guards from trains—the very people who are passenger safety champions?

Joseph Johnson: We want the railways to be safe. In terms of crimes per million passenger journeys, they are safer than they were a decade ago. There are 19 crimes per million passenger journeys today, and a decade ago there were 30 crimes per million passenger journeys, but that is still too many and we want crime levels to come down. That is why the British Transport police are focusing on this very carefully. We have better reporting schemes, such as 61016, which I mentioned. As I said, we want more staff working on our railways, not fewer. That is the case for operators such as Southern and SWR, where there have recently been disputes.

Cycling and Walking

13. Andrew Selous (South West Bedfordshire) (Con): What recent steps his Department has taken to promote cycling and walking.

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Transport (Jesse Norman): Tragically not, Mr Speaker.

Mr Speaker: I call Minister of State Norman.

Jesse Norman: A man can only dream.

Mr Speaker: It is only a matter of time.

Jesse Norman: The enormous energy that the Government have been showing in the area of cycling and walking, following our investment strategy published last year. That includes: the new safety review; new funding; cycle ambition cities; the transforming cities fund, which is being heavily used to improve urban environments for cycling and walking; support for changes to the “Highway Code” on close passing; and a great number of other measures. When we announce the response to the cycle safety review later this year, I hope there will be more to say on this topic.

Andrew Selous: If we are going to get half of all children cycling to school, as happens in the Netherlands—that can be compared with the paltry 3% here in the UK—so that we can cut pollution, congestion and obesity, can we ensure that all new roads and housing estates have safe cycle infrastructure designed into them, as it is more expensive to retrofit later?
Jesse Norman: I certainly share that ambition. As my hon. Friend knows, the Government are seeking to have a child of 12, as well as people of all sexes, races and backgrounds, able to cycle without fear or impediment. Not all housing estates will be suitable for this kind of change—[HON. MEMBERS: “Why not?”] Some may be too far removed from urban city centres, but where they are suitable, I would support that ambition in the way that the Government have done by looking at electrification for new housing.

Matt Rodda (Reading East) (Lab): The Transport Department’s own statistics show that the Government are set to miss their target to increase the number of people who regularly walk and cycle. Walking is barely increasing, and many people are scared to cycle, as has been suggested, with nearly 60% telling the British social attitudes survey that they felt cycling was too dangerous, apparently because of the volume of traffic on the roads.

The Minister himself has said that the UK has a long way to go to improve levels of cycling and walking. Is it not high time for the Government to show some leadership and invest properly in walking and cycling, rather than paying lip service to pedestrians and cyclists?

Jesse Norman: Well, I think I said that we had a long way to go to match the standards set in some European cities that have been pioneers in this area. I do not think there is any doubt that the Government are doing more than any previous Government have done, and certainly more than the last Government by a factor of some three times in terms of funding per person—[Interruption.] The national chuntering club is out on the other side of the House. We have also taken a host of other measures to try to support cycling and improve safety, with precisely the laudable aims that the hon. Gentleman has in mind.

Rail Network Accessibility

14. Marsha De Cordova (Battersea) (Lab): What recent assessment he has made of the accessibility of the rail network.

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Transport (Ms Nusrat Ghani): Three quarters of all passenger journeys are now made through stations with step-free access, compared with only half in 2006, and 87% of current rolling stock now meets accessibility standards compared with 75% last year. The inclusive transport strategy is the next step in our ambition to deliver accessible transport, and it includes up to £300 million to fund the Access for All programme for stations until at least 2024. All rolling stock will meet accessibility standards by 2020.

Marsha De Cordova: For thousands of disabled people, an accessible rail network can make the difference to going to work and seeing family and friends. We know that last year more than a third of disabled people experienced problems when travelling. In my constituency, three stations—Battersea Park, Queenstown Road and Wandsworth Town—are inaccessible. Rather than rail companies having to compete for funding to make stations more accessible, why cannot the Minister agree to ensure that the Access for All programme is adequately funded so that every single station can be made accessible?

Ms Ghani: Access for All is a £300 million fund. At present, 75% of all journeys take place via step-free stations. I understand that the Battersea station was put forward for step-free access in the previous round. The new £300 million fund that is now being made available will take on board deferred projects next April, so the hon. Lady will be pleased to note that step-free access will be allocated and, through working with Network Rail, should be delivered for her station.

Topical Questions

The Secretary of State for Transport (Chris Grayling): It might be helpful if I inform the House that High Speed 2 is today publishing its environmental statement for phase 2b, which is the northern leg from Crewe to Manchester and through the east midlands to Leeds. It will be available in the Library. The route will clearly have an impact on many people, and I have instructed HS2 to treat people with as much decency as possible at what is a difficult time for them. If there are examples of where that is not happening, I want to hear about it, as does the Under-Secretary of State for Transport, my hon. Friend the Member for Wadlden (Ms Ghani). I would encourage Members to come and see us about that.

Luciana Berger: The northern powerhouse Minister was in my constituency last week to see the new Northern trains. During his visit, he said that passengers would be delighted that they have air-conditioned trains with wi-fi and charging points. New trains are welcome, but what my constituents need more than anything is reliable services that run on time. A recent Liverpool Echo poll showed that 52% of readers said that they would have to find another way to travel if services remain as unreliable as they have been since the timetable changes. There is still a very serious problem, so what steps will the Secretary of State take to resolve the rail disruption caused by the introduction of revised timetables since May?

Chris Grayling: As the hon. Lady will be aware, Northern rail’s performance has improved markedly since the difficult days in June and July. It is now running more services than it did prior to the timetable change. As for what we will do, we will replace every train with a newer and more reliable train, and we will get rid of all the old Pacer trains that run into and out of Liverpool which, frankly, should have gone to the scrapyard years ago. I hope that she will welcome the investment we have put into Liverpool Lime Street station. I am going there next week to see the long overdue work that has been done to upgrade that station.

Mr Speaker: I call Mark Garnier. Not here.

Lee Rowley (North East Derbyshire) (Con): Chesterfield canal is part of the way through a restoration of its historical route, which is to be completed in time for its 250th anniversary a few years from now. However,
Chris Grayling: I should like to give my hon. Friend that assurance. It is a tragedy, in an era when canals are being reopened for leisure purposes, that when the M6 was built, so many parts of the Kendal canal were cut off and are no longer available. I do not wish, and I do not expect, to see HS2 do the same and culvert canals when the railway is being built.

T3. [906939] Martyn Day (Linlithgow and East Falkirk) (SNP): Will the forthcoming aviation strategy Green Paper contain clear proposals for how the new slots to Scottish airports from Heathrow will be protected, and a guarantee on their numbers?

Chris Grayling: That will not happen as part of the aviation strategy document itself, but it will be done through separate mechanisms. I have made it very clear that—probably using the public service obligation procedure—we will introduce requirements alongside the development consent order, when it comes, to ensure that those slots are guaranteed for regional airports in the United Kingdom. That is an essential component of the expansion of Heathrow, and my Department will ensure that the protection of those slots for the regions of the UK is absolutely watertight.

T6. [906943] Lucy Allan (Telford) (Con): Since July, the Arriva Trains Wales service from Telford to Birmingham has been running with only two carriages, causing delays and overcrowding. Telford is a rapidly growing new town, but with only one direct train service per hour, we are being left behind. Will the Minister meet me, and the Telford train forum, to discuss how we can work together to ensure that Telford has the train service that it needs in order to grow and thrive?

The Minister of State, Department for Transport (Joseph Johnson): Of course I should be delighted to meet my hon. Friend. Let me just add that the new West Midlands franchise serving Telford will in future introduce greater capacity on lines serving her constituency.

T4. [906940] Alex Norris (Nottingham North) (Lab/Co-op): What role do Ministers see for sub-national transport bodies such as Midlands Connect in the prioritising of investment in our major road network?

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Transport (Jesse Norman): We work closely with the sub-national transport bodies, which can be rather helpful in assessing local demand and local needs across a region.

T7. [906944] Craig Tracey (North Warwickshire) (Con): I have been contacted by a number of constituents about the use by heavy goods vehicles of unsuitable rural roads as rat runs. I understand that technology now exists to track those HGVs and create geo-fences to deter them from using unsuitable roads. Will the Minister consider making that technology compulsory to improve the lives of rural communities?

Jesse Norman: We absolutely recognise the problem. At present, the unsuitable use of roads is controlled through information and traffic control mechanisms, by Highways England and local authorities. We are tracking the geo-fencing technology closely. It requires a lot of other moving parts, but we are certainly thinking about it.

T8. [906945] Matthew Pennycook (Greenwich and Woolwich) (Lab): Tomorrow, Southeastern will introduce a temporary autumn recovery timetable, which will cause reductions in services and station-skipping throughout my constituency. Will the Minister commit himself to monitoring the situation to ensure that a normal timetable is introduced as soon as possible?

Joseph Johnson: We will of course be monitoring the autumn timetables across the country. I am glad to see that Southeastern's performance has been good in recent months: I believe that the current public performance measure is 94%.

Peter Heaton-Jones (North Devon) (Con): Will the Minister update me on the work that he is doing with Devon County Council to ensure that there is a prompt start to the improvement works on the north Devon link road?

Jesse Norman: As my hon. Friend will know, the council is carrying out preparatory work on the road. We have been delighted to offer more than £80 million of funding under our large local majors scheme. We would like the work to begin in 2020, but we rely very much on the extra commitment that the council is making to ensure that the different aspects work.

T9. [906946] Mr Jim Cunningham (Coventry South) (Lab): There have been a number of incidents involving Uber and black-cab drivers in the west midlands, and in one instance police were called to Coventry station to sort the problem out. When will the Minister legislate, as recommended by the Task and Finish Group on Taxi and Private Hire Vehicle Licensing?

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Transport (Ms Nusrat Ghani): The Task and Finish Group was established as a result of the ingenious foresight of a previous Transport Minister, my right hon. Friend the Member for South Holland and The Deepings (Mr Hayes). Its report was made public only in the summer, but I am evaluating all its recommendations and will make a statement shortly.

Mr Marcus Jones (Nuneaton) (Con): HS2 will bring significant extra capacity and resilience to our railways. What more will it do to help and support places such as Nuneaton on the existing west coast main line?

Chris Grayling: There is a lot of discussion about HS2 and I simply wish to state again today the Government's commitment to the project; it is, I think, supported across the House and I welcome that support. The point about HS2 is that we have a rail system that is bursting at the seams and we have to create extra capacity on it. By creating the extra capacity on HS2 and taking the express trains off the conventional lines...
and putting them on to HS2, we will free space for more commuter services into the cities affected and to places such as Nuneaton.

Paula Sherriff (Dewsbury) (Lab): The rail service offered by TransPennine Express to my constituents is frankly abysmal. If trains turn up at all, they are usually late, overcrowded and far too short. No more warm words, Secretary of State: what are you doing about it here and now?

Mr Speaker: I am not doing anything about it at all, but I hope that the Secretary of State might be.

Chris Grayling: What we are doing is making up for the fact that the last Labour Government in power established a zero-investment set of franchises in the north, with no new trains and no new investment. We are replacing, with either a brand new train or a refurbished-as-new train, every single train on the Northern and TransPennine franchises, with more seats, more carriages and a better deal for commuters. It has taken longer than I would have wished, but it is going to make a difference.

Michael Tomlinson (Mid Dorset and North Poole) (Con): I acknowledge the Secretary of State’s work to reduce congestion in the south-west, but may I urge him to look specifically at increasing capacity and reducing congestion on the A31 in Dorset?

Jesse Norman: As my hon. Friend will be aware, we have invested heavily in the A303. We have been looking closely at the A358 corridor and upgrading the A30, so I will absolutely discuss further with him the particular road he has in mind.

Christian Matheson (City of Chester) (Lab): The M56 is even more congested now than when I last raised the problem just a few months ago. When can we expect confirmation that it will be included for upgrade in the next road investment strategy?

Jesse Norman: As the hon. Gentleman will be aware, we are already investing quite heavily in junctions 6 to 8 on the M56. Decisions about the second stage of the road investment strategy will be announced next year.

Huw Merriman (Bexhill and Battle) (Con): On behalf of the huge number of passengers who were delayed getting into London today, may I invite the rail Minister to give an enormous, if perhaps metaphorical, kick up the backside to the train operators, which should tell us not to get off trains when the tube station there is closed, to Network Rail, which should tell us the same thing as we walk through the station, and to Transport for London for perhaps not letting those organisations know in the first place? It is not good enough when disabled people have to walk to one part of a station only to find it is closed, and then to get back on their train and have to be told by other passengers not to do so. We pay for the service; we should not have to run it.

Joseph Johnson: There is clearly an important lesson to be learned regarding communication between the operating companies and passengers, and I will ensure that the Department gives it careful attention.

Mr Dennis Skinner (Bolsover) (Lab): Now that the Secretary of State has admitted that HS2, with its £56 billion bill—and still rising—has got enough money to avoid the Chesterfield canal, will he take a decision to avoid the 30 houses due to be knocked down by HS2 in the village of Newton? Say it now, and let’s get the matter sorted out.

Ms Ghani: It will surprise you, Mr Speaker, to know that I had a very productive meeting with the hon. Gentleman, and his councillors and activists, to understand the pressures he is under as he represents his constituency. There is no denying that HS2 is a large infrastructure project, and we will do everything we can to mitigate the impacts on communities and the environment.

Robert Courts (Witney) (Con): As a regular user of the A44 cycle path, I have seen many of the benefits that cycling can bring. As we look for improvements to the A40 and the Cotswold line to address congestion, does the Minister agree that cycling plays an essential part in an integrated transport network for West Oxfordshire?

Jesse Norman: Yes, we feel very strongly that for both the strategic network and local roads there is more scope for integration, and much of the investment we are making through both Highways England designated funds and local road investment is designed to support that integration.

Mr Speaker: Order. What is now required is a single-sentence question without semi-colons.

Mr Paul Sweeney (Glasgow North East) (Lab/Co-op): Has the Minister followed the developments since our last meeting on the issue of ports infrastructure on the west coast of Scotland, and is she able to update us on any progress?

Ms Ghani: We are working on our Maritime 2050 strategy, which will look at ports, infrastructure, the environment, accessibility and employment opportunities. I would be more than happy to meet the hon. Gentleman to update him since our last meeting.

Tom Tugendhat (Tonbridge and Malling) (Con): Does the Speaker agree that it has come to a pretty pass when a Member finds out that works have begun on a motorway to turn it into a parking lot without consultation either with the local community or with surrounding Members? The M26 works started last night. I wrote to my right hon. Friend the Secretary of State in April to ask whether this was going to happen, and I was assured that works were not planned. Only yesterday was it confirmed to me that Highways England had said that that was exactly what was planned, despite having told me the reverse only a week earlier. Does the Speaker agree with me, and will he urge my right hon. Friend the Secretary of State to explain to the House how this planning permission has been granted with no consultation?

Mr Speaker: I admire the breathing capacity of the hon. Gentleman. I get the impression that he is at least moderately discontented.
Tom Tugendhat: Correct, Sir.

Mr Speaker: I am not sure that my view is of any great interest to the House, but I am sure that it will want to know what the Secretary of State has to say to my somewhat irritated colleague.

Chris Grayling: I am happy to meet my hon. Friend to discuss this. I do not expect any of the contingencies that we have in place for a no-deal Brexit to be needed, because I am confident that we will reach a sensible agreement, but I would be happy to discuss this with him.

Clive Efford (Eltham) (Lab): Peak-time trains were cancelled yesterday and today, and there are regular delays at peak time. Is the railways Minister satisfied with the performance of the network and of the Southeastern train operator?

Joseph Johnson: Of course there is always room for improvement, and the next franchise has set demanding specifications for the south-eastern section of the network. I would say to the hon. Gentleman that the performance of Southeastern has been strong in recent months. Today, the public performance measure that tests arrivals within five minutes of the scheduled arrival time for Eltham to London Bridge has been excellent, at above 90%.

Vicky Ford (Chelmsford) (Con): I am sorry that I was late this morning, Mr Speaker—the train was delayed again. When are we going to get 15-minute Delay Repay compensation for passengers on the Great Eastern main line?

Joseph Johnson: Under this Government, we have been rolling out Delay Repay 15 in a number of franchises. We are seeking to do that as and when franchises come up for letting so that more passengers get compensation when their trains are delayed by more than 15 minutes.

Daniel Zeichner (Cambridge) (Lab): Last week, the chief executive of Go-Ahead, one of our major private bus operators, called for a national bus strategy. We have strategies for everything else, so why not for buses?

Ms Ghani: I know that the hon. Gentleman is a passionate advocate for buses, and we have met to discuss this issue many times. I am keen to ensure that we are putting the right resources into this and that the people making decisions on bus services are given the right support. This is something that I am exploring and keen to do.

Tom Pursglove (Corby) (Con): Will the Minister undertake to give Highways England a nudge to carry out the environmental study required for the A45 dualling works between Stanwick and Thrapston so that they can go ahead in the next road period?

Jesse Norman: I do not need to, because my hon. Friend has done a splendid job in the House himself.

Nic Dakin (Scunthorpe) (Lab): Given that the introduction of E10 fuel would improve air quality and reduce carbon emissions, why do we not introduce it? When are the Government going to do this?

Jesse Norman: The hon. Gentleman will be aware that this is the subject of a consultation that has only just closed. We will need to review that, but we are looking closely at the issue and we have been making tremendous progress on it. He will also be aware that some of the business concerns that have been expressed had much more to do with the low bioethanol price and higher wheat prices than with the Government’s position.

Several hon. Members rose—

Mr Speaker: Order. I am sorry, but we must now move on to other business.
Student Loan Book: Sale

Mr Speaker: Just before I call the shadow Secretary of State to ask the urgent question, I should like to point out to the House that this is not the occasion for a general debate on the merits or demerits of student loan arrangements. This will be narrowly focused—with laser-like precision, I am sure—on the sale of the student loan book, and inquiries that pertain thereto will be orderly. We must not have what I would call a Second Reading-style debate. In any case, I do not intend to run this for longer than half an hour, and possibly for a shorter period than that.

10.39 am

Angela Rayner (Ashton-under-Lyne) (Lab) (Urgent Question): To ask the Secretary of State for Education if he will make a statement on the sale of the student loan book?

The Minister for Universities, Science, Research and Innovation (Mr Sam Gyimah): I want to explain to the House the rationale for the sale of the student loan book and make some important points. The sale will categorically not result in private investors setting the terms or operating the collection of repayments. Loans in scope will continue to be serviced by Her Majesty’s Revenue and Customs and the Student Loans Company on the same basis as equivalent unsold loans. Investors will have no right to change any of the current loan arrangements or to directly contact borrowers. Furthermore, the Government’s policies on student finance and higher education are not being altered by the sale. These older loans, the borrowers of which benefited from lower tuition fees and lower interest rates, are not in the scope of the current review of post-18 education and funding.

The sale represents an opportunity for the Government to guarantee money up front today, rather than fluctuating and uncertain payments over a longer period. That will allow the Government to invest in other policies with greater economic and social returns. We will proceed with the sale only if market conditions remain favourable and if the final value-for-money assessment is positive.

Angela Rayner: I thank you, Mr Speaker, for granting this urgent question, and I thank the Minister for turning up today. It is a shame that the Secretary of State is too busy talking about Labour’s policies to come to this House to explain his own, because the Government last night snuck out a plan to sell another £4 billion of the student loan book, but they have once again told us nothing about their proposal. Will the Minister therefore tell us his Department’s valuation of the loans that it is planning to sell? What value does the Treasury’s Green Book place on them?

Does the Minister acknowledge that the National Audit Office found that his Department made a loss of £900 million on the previous student loan book sale and that £600 million in future income was lost? The sale was supposed to be subject to a so-called value-for-money test, so will he commit to publish the details of the test so that the House can scrutinise them? The Government have previously said that they will raise £12 billion by privatising student debt, so will the Minister tell us whether that is still their plan and state the total value of loans they are planning to sell? How was the figure of £12 billion reached?

Will the Minister confirm that when the sales go ahead the Government will lose a source of income for as long as 25 years in exchange for a one-off payment? Can he give us any justification for the policy of selling off an asset to flatter this Government’s terrible position on national debt? With nearly £1 billion lost in the previous sale, just how low would the sale price have to go before the Government decided that selling simply was not worth it? In short, how much public money do we have to lose before Education Ministers start learning their own lessons?

Mr Gyimah: I object to the hon. Lady’s point that the loan sales plan was snuck out under the radar. The proposal was set out in a written ministerial statement for the House to see, which is obviously why the Opposition spokesperson is in a position to ask an urgent question today. Student loan sales in this country have happened over nearly two decades. This is not new, and it started with two sales of mortgage-style loans under the previous Labour Government in the late 1990s. It was that Labour Administration in 2008 that passed the enabling legislation for the current sales. As I have said, the sale will not affect borrowers, who will continue to deal with the Student Loans Company.

The National Audit Office did refer to the write-down of the loan book, but anybody who has studied accounting will know that the present value of a future income stream will be lower than the value if one waited 30 years. In capturing some of that money, the Government can invest in vital public services today, and that is the rationale for selling the student loan book—the previous Labour Government saw that rationale as well.

The sale will also be good for the taxpayer. Once people have been to university, it serves no public purpose to have the money tied up. The sale will release that money to invest in other priorities. On the valuation, the face value of the sale is £3.9 billion, but what we will do and how we will look to proceed will ultimately depend on market conditions.

Mr Gyimah: My hon. Friend will be aware that money raised from student loan sales goes to the Treasury, which makes a decision about in which public services to invest that money. This ultimately means that the taxpayer gets some of the reward now, rather than having to wait for 25 years. We are working with professionals on the range of estimates and I am happy to share it with my hon. Friend when we have the answer.

Mr Philip Hollobone (Kettering) (Con): What is the Minister’s range of estimates for how much money the sale might raise, and will he confirm to the House that any money raised will be reinvested in other public services?

Mr Gyimah: My hon. Friend will be aware that privatising student debt has not been without its costs. There has been £900 million lost on the current review, and that is why we are proceeding with the sale. This will allow us to invest in other priorities.

Martyn Day (Linlithgow and East Falkirk) (SNP): This policy highlights the limitations of how this Government assess value for money and measure the cost of student loans over time. It prompts the question which Department has it right: the Department for Education or HM Treasury. This is clearly another example of the UK Government selling off assets for short-term capital gain. Will the Minister confirm how much of the student loan book he intends to sell off? What assurances can the UK Government give that the selling off of the remaining tranches of the student loan
book will achieve long-term benefit for the taxpayers? And why are the UK Government devaluing assets and selling them off for less than they are actually worth?

Mr Gyimah: The sale remains subject to market conditions and a value-for-money assessment, but I will not be taking lessons from the Scottish National party on student finance. The SNP has created a system that actively works against the disadvantaged in Scotland. We have a system that is funding our universities well and helping the disadvantaged.

Bob Blackman (Harrow East) (Con): I thank my hon. Friend for his answers. Can he give me and my constituents, either students or borrowers, an assurance that whoever buys this loan book will have no access to personal data and no contact or involvement in setting the rates for the loans?

Mr Gyimah: My hon. Friend has my categorical assurance that that will not happen.

Mr Barry Sheerman (Huddersfield) (Lab/Co-op): The Minister must know that those in the financial services sector—the sort of people who buy these loan books—are the least trusted people in this country. Is it not a fact that there are hundreds of thousands, if not millions, of former students out there with some £50,000 of personal debt who are extremely worried about what will happen to the debt sold to these unscrupulous people?

Mr Gyimah: The loans we currently have are income contingent and are collected through the tax system, so even when the loans are sold off, the new owner of the loans has no means or mechanism to contact the students or chase them for payment.

Chi Onwurah (Newcastle upon Tyne Central) (Lab): The Minister seems to be saying that he is selling off the student loan book to invest in the public services that his Government have slashed. Given that it is the end of austerity, should it not be possible to invest in those public services without privatising the financing of our higher education and the debt of so many students?

Mr Gyimah: All the Government are doing is trying to capture an income stream that we will get over 25 years if we do it right, and then we will have the benefit of the future income stream. That is done not only by altering the terms of the loan system, but also by investing in the public services without privatising the financing of our higher education. That is the right thing to do.

Steve McCabe (Birmingham, Selly Oak) (Lab): How many accountants does the Minister know who would advise their clients to sell off an asset worth £3.5 billion for less than half that?

Mr Gyimah: The final sale price will be determined by market conditions, but it makes a lot of sense in terms of the time and the value of money for the Government to capture those assets now.

Jamie Stone (Caithness, Sutherland and Easter Ross) (LD): Surely now, like at no other time, we should be educating our country as best we can for the future, particularly in view of the uncertain times ahead. Does the Secretary of State not agree that this House has the right to demand that all the money thus received is spent on education and only education?

Mr Gyimah: I thank the hon. Gentleman for that. The promotion, but I am not the Secretary of State. If he is willing to lobby the Treasury on my behalf, I would be delighted if all this money were to be spent on education.

Ruth George (High Peak) (Lab): The value of these loans has increased by the extortionate interest rate being charged to ex-students—at 3% above the retail prices index, it is currently 6.1%, which is far higher than the rate for any other loan available on similar terms. Have the Government made an assessment of the impact of these loans and repayments on young people’s ability to find housing, buy a home and get a secure financial future?

Mr Gyimah: These loans are earlier loans and not affected by the current interest rate policy. I think it absolutely clear that whoever buys the loans cannot alter the terms of the loan. The post-18 review is looking at interest rates on existing loans, as well as a number of other aspects of the student finance system.

Dr David Drew (Stroud) (Lab/Co-op): Will the Minister elucidate how many students have yet to make any payments in terms of their loan obligations? What analysis have the Government made of why they have not yet made any payments?

Mr Gyimah: The hon. Gentleman, an experienced parliamentarian, will know that we have an income-contingent loan system. The repayment threshold has recently been raised from £21,000 to £25,000, thereby benefiting students to the tune of £300 a year. Deliberately designed into the system is a subsidy from the Government; we understand that 45% of students will not pay back the loans in full—that is the subsidy that goes into the loan system. The system means that no one is barred from going to university as a result of their personal financial circumstances.

Mr Paul Sweeney (Glasgow North East) (Lab/Co-op): One benefit of being elected to this place last year was that I was able to pay off my student loan much quicker than expected. As the Minister will be aware, it was arrested from my wages directly, in the same way as national insurance contributions and income tax. So why on earth would the Government sell off future revenue sources such as student loans, given that they would not dream of doing it for national insurance or income tax? This is absurd.

Mr Gyimah: The repayments are collected through the tax system, and that does not change at all. All that changes is that the benefits of the future income stream now accrue to someone else. That is done not only by Governments around the world, but by businesses. It is a simple fact that if we can capture the value of an uncertain income stream today at a reasonable price, it makes sense to do so.

Tom Pursglove (Corby) (Con): Have lessons from previous loan book sales informed the decision making on this tranche?

Mr Gyimah: I caught just the tail end of that question. If I understood it correctly, my hon. Friend was asking about the process and the decision making in the past.
We have been dealing with this for two decades in this place; under the last Labour Government there were mortgage-style loans, where loans were sold to private investors, who could contact students directly and chase them for the money. That has now changed under this system.

Paul Blomfield (Sheffield Central) (Lab): Will the Minister tell the House at what level the Department is currently assessing the resource accounting and budgeting charge? Will he share his consideration of the Office for National Statistics review of the treatment of unrepayable debt on the Government books?

Mr Gyimah: The RAB charge was at about 35%, but as a result of raising the repayment threshold from £21,000 to £25,000, which in essence makes the loan system more generous, it now stands at 45%. The hon. Gentleman is right to ask about the ONS reclassification of the student loan book, but that is an exercise the ONS is going through and we have yet to hear what its recommendations are. When we find out what those recommendations are, both the Department and the post-18 review will look at them and take the appropriate action.

Mr Speaker: It is very good of the Minister for Security and Economic Crime to drop in on us; he is just in time for the next urgent question and we are greatly obliged to him, but there is obviously not always very good communication between Whips Offices and ministerial offices. We should now proceed with the urgent question, because the hon. Member for Rhondda (Chris Bryant) is present, although if people wish to raise points of order, I might be tolerant of them. There appears to be no great appetite for points of order at this time—

Angela Rayner (Ashton-under-Lyne) (Lab): On a point of order, Mr Speaker. As a new Member of the House, although I have managed to get on to the Front Bench, I was wondering whether you could guide me on what happens under these circumstances. Am I able to assist Mr Speaker in his dilemma?

Mr Speaker: Well, I thought it would be useful if the Opposition spokesman were here, but there is no formal requirement for that person to be present, because the question is of course to the Minister, so as long as a Minister is present, that suffices. What happens otherwise is one or other of two things: either a very helpful Member—perhaps even a shadow Secretary of State—pops up at the Dispatch Box to raise a very worthy point of order, which I take my time in responding to, or alternatively it is necessary for there to be a temporary suspension of the sitting. That would be if a Minister were not present, but the Minister is present—

Chris Bryant (Rhondda) (Lab): Only just!

Mr Speaker: Only just. He should not be too proud of the fact that he is present, because he is only just on time, but at least he is here. The hon. Member for Ashton-under-Lyne (Angela Rayner) has helped our proceedings, for which we are grateful, and we can now proceed. The shadow Minister, the hon. Member for Manchester, Gorton (Afzal Khan), will no doubt get here as soon as he can and take up his place on the Opposition Front Bench.

Chris Bryant: Sometimes it helps to be loquacious, Mr Speaker.
**Foreign Fighters and the Death Penalty**

10.56 am

**Chris Bryant (Rhondda) (Lab) (Urgent Question):** To ask the Home Secretary to make a statement on foreign fighters and the death penalty.

**The Minister for Security and Economic Crime (Mr Ben Wallace):** Thank you for your patience, Mr Speaker; I apologise. You were even more efficient in the conduct of the previous urgent question than normal, so I have had to run to the House to answer the hon. Gentleman’s question.

The management of Syria travellers is not a new or emerging issue. Since the conflict began, approximately 900 people have travelled from the UK to take part, of whom 40% have returned and 20% are thought to have been killed. There have been several high-profile convictions in this country for terrorist activity linked to travel to Syria.

The Government take seriously their responsibility to protect the public. We have been consistently clear that where there is evidence that crimes have been committed, foreign fighters should be brought to justice in accordance with due legal process, regardless of their nationality. The appropriate process will always depend on the individual circumstances. Everyone who returns from Syria or Iraq can expect to be the subject of an investigation to determine whether they pose a threat, and they should be in no doubt that we will take the strongest possible action to protect our national security.

We have planned and prepared for the risk posed by British returnees as Daesh is defeated in Iraq and Syria, and we are using a range of tools to disrupt and diminish that threat, including prosecution under the full range of existing counter-terrorism legislation and the use of other powers such as terrorism prevention and investigation measures or temporary exclusion orders to help to manage the risk posed. We are going further by introducing new measures in the Counter-Terrorism and investigation measures or temporary exclusion orders to help to manage the risk posed. We are going further by introducing new measures in the Counter-Terrorism and Border Security Bill that will help to deal with the scourge of foreign fighters.

Our long-standing policy on the death penalty has not changed. We oppose the death penalty in all circumstances as a matter of principle, regardless of nationality. Decisions to provide assistance are taken in accordance with the Government’s overseas security and justice assistance, or OSJA, guidance, introduced in 2011. The guidance clearly sets out the UK Government’s policy in respect of the death penalty.

**Chris Bryant:** I like the Minister, but that was a load of sententious guff that has nothing to do with the question in hand. Yesterday, the Government marked World Day Against the Death Penalty by declaring, as the Minister has again today, that they are committed “to oppose the use of the death penalty in all circumstances as a matter of principle.”

In the past, that has always meant that before co-operating with a foreign judicial system where the death penalty is in operation, we seek assurances in every case that the suspects will not face the death penalty; yet, as the Minister admitted on 23 July, the Government secretly decided earlier this year not to seek such assurances in the case of two foreign fighters. I want to see those fighters face justice, but the people who lost family members to those people do not want them to face the death penalty.

The Minister claimed on 23 July that there was precedent for not seeking such assurances and he undertook to write to us; his precise words were that that would be our “summer reading”. I got his letter late this Tuesday afternoon. He clearly does not understand the word “summer”, but does he actually understand the word “precedent”? His letter says that this has happened on two previous occasions since 2001, but it point blank refuses to give any details whatever. According to the dictionary, a precedent is meant to be “an earlier event or action that is regarded as an example or guide to be considered in subsequent similar circumstances.”

So we cannot cite a precedent without citing any of the details, because we cannot consider whether it is a precedent unless we know what actually happened on the previous occasion.

Will the Minister give us any details of the two cases that he says happened since 2001? Can he confirm that one relates to a case in Thailand in 2014? If so, it is exactly the opposite of a precedent—it is an anti-precedent—because the courts then decided that the police had acted unlawfully and failed to have regard for public policy, and the Government’s decision was struck down. The Minister also told the House in July: “There was no request from the US Administration for us to vary our assurances.”—[Official Report, 23 July 2018; Vol. 645, c. 728.]

I am sorry, but I do not think that that is true. Can the Minister confirm that, when the Home Secretary met the US Attorney General in May, Jeff Sessions made it absolutely clear that any request from the UK for the customary assurances was likely to result in political outrage in the Trump Administration and that is why the Home Secretary decided not to seek any assurances?

Will the Minister also confirm that the then Foreign Secretary wrote to the Home Secretary to say that this case was “unprecedented”? The truth is that the only thing that was unprecedented about this case was that the US Government barked and the UK cowed.

Mr Speaker, you know what I think really happened? The Government got the collywobbles. Jeff Sessions huffed and puffed and blew the Home Secretary down. The Prime Minister decided to kowtow to Trump, and the Government changed the policy secretly without telling this House.

**Mr Wallace:** I am old enough to remember “Jackanory”, and I think that I have just heard a “Jackanory” narrative from the hon. Gentleman. Let me deal with his questions. He asserted that, in every case previously, we have always sought assurances. That has not been the case. I apologise for not getting back to him in time for his summer reading. We did have to go back into the previous Labour Government to find a number of cases; I am talking about a Government in which the hon. Gentleman was a Minister in the very Department where this was taking place. We discovered that one of the cases took place in a Labour Government after 2001.

Secondly, the details of mutual legal assistance arrangements, as the hon. Gentleman will know, are subject to strict confidentiality, because they are often
about individuals involved in an investigation. However, I can help him in his ‘Jackanory’ story: the 2014 Thailand example that he has cited is not a case where this has happened; it has not been brought to my attention. Perhaps he has raised another case, but, certainly, the two of which I am aware do not relate to that case.

Furthermore, when the hon. Gentleman comes to talk about the policy of successor Governments, he should know that, in 2011, this Government brought forward, for the first time, through the OSJA, written guidance. It was very clear in paragraph 9 that, on some occasions, there were strong reasons for not seeking assurances in such cases. The policy before 2011, including the time when the hon. Gentleman was a member of the Government, was that a Government could exchange evidence without seeking assurances on the death penalty in “exceptional circumstances”—[Interruption.] I think that the hon. Gentleman knows that his Government did do it. Certainly, he was a member of the Government when one of these cases took place.

The reality is that the two individuals in question, who are suspects and innocent until proven guilty, are charged, or effectively viewed, as having been part of very, very dangerous and heinous crimes, including torture and beheading, against many, many people, and that they are held in a place of detention, effectively in a war zone in north Syria, by non-state actors. That means that the choices are stark for any Government charged with keeping people safe and trying to deliver justice for the victims.

We are guided by the overseas security and justice assistance. The Home Secretary and the Foreign Secretary considered this guidance strongly, found that there were strong reasons and took the necessary decision that in this case we would share with the United States evidence on the condition that Guantanamo was not part of the process, but in this case we did not seek death penalty assurances.

Sir Desmond Swayne (New Forest West) (Con): Some of us, and most of our constituents, are a lot less squeamish about this than the Minister and the hon. Member for Rhondda (Chris Bryant). Indeed, they take the view that these people had it coming, didn’t they?

Mr Wallace: What these individuals who are suspected of an offence and many others have coming is justice. We will do everything we can to work with our allies to see that justice is administered in a way that follows due process and that takes place in a court of law, where there is a separation between the judiciary and the Executive, where people have a right to defence and to make an argument, and where the rule of law prevails. That is what they and anybody else who involves themselves in that type of terrorism has coming to them, and that is what we are trying to uphold.

Afzal Khan (Manchester, Gorton) (Lab): May I also apologise for not being here at the start of the urgent question?

Wednesday was World Day Against the Death Penalty. The Foreign Office Minister in the other place spoke about the Government’s absolute opposition to the death penalty. The Labour party also opposes the death penalty. It is barbaric and was rightly abolished in this country more than half a century ago. Yet, at the same time, the Government have agreed to help the US in prosecuting El Shafee Elsheikh and Alexanda Kotey, who could ultimately face the death penalty. I will say no more on this specific case, as it is subject to a High Court challenge.

The Labour party makes it absolutely clear that those who commit abhorrent crimes should face the full force of the law, but in bringing people to justice we should never sacrifice the very values that those who wish us harm seek to attack. We are therefore rightly concerned following the Government’s revelation that, on two previous occasions going back some years, the UK has co-operated with foreign states in cases involving the death penalty. Does the Minister agree that if the Government oppose the death penalty in principle, they must oppose it in every case without exception?

It was revealed in the court earlier this week that the Home Secretary had written to the former Foreign Secretary stating that “significant attempts having been made to seek a full assurance, it is now right to accede to the mutual legal assistance request without an assurance”.

Can the Minister explain what “significant” means in this context? Also, what response was received from the US authorities when these requests for full assurance were made? Furthermore, what new material factor caused the Secretaries of State to conclude that assurance was no longer necessary, in contravention of the long-standing policy of successive British Governments and their commitments to opposing the death penalty in all circumstances? Why did the Government not renew the death penalty strategy in 2016? Is that an oversight? If not, when do they intend to come to the House to explain the matter? Finally, does the Minister agree that making exceptions undermines our own credibility on human rights issues around the world?

Mr Wallace: I think both the hon. Gentleman and I were slightly caught short by the speed of the previous urgent question. I will do my best to answer his questions. Our guidance for upholding our principled position on the death penalty and following MLA requests is contained in the OSJA, published in 2011. Paragraph 9(b) on the death penalty clearly states:

“Where no assurances are forthcoming or where there are strong reasons not to seek assurances, the case should automatically be deemed ‘High Risk’ and FCO Ministers should be consulted to determine whether, given the specific circumstances of the case, we should nevertheless provide assistance.”

It was our view that there were strong reasons not to seek assurances.

This case has no easy solutions. It is easy for everyone to say, “We want justice for the victims”, but the options before this Government, our security forces and our citizens do not include a magic wand to get people miraculously into a UK court or provide evidence that matches the statute book that we happen to have. The strong reasons that, we would say, mean that the rights of those individuals detained are better served by a judicial trial in the United States are that they have a better chance of proper representation in a court of law than if they were left in detention by non-state actors in a war zone in north Syria, sent to Guantanamo Bay—something that the Government oppose fully—or allowed to go back into the battlefield and wreak murder and
death in the same way that they have been accused of doing in the past. Those were the options on the table that we as Ministers, charged with keeping people safe and balancing our obligations, and implementing the Government’s policy as set out in the OSJA, have to weigh up. We felt that there were strong reasons not to seek death penalty assurances when sharing the evidence for a criminal trial in the United States.

Mr Philip Hollobone (Kettering) (Con): My constituents in Kettering are as outraged as I am that 900 British citizens should have decided to go abroad and become foreign fighters engaged in armed conflict against members of Her Majesty’s armed forces; 180 have been killed in theatre, 360 have returned and 360 remain at large. Why on earth are we not stripping these people of their British citizenship, not allowing them back into the country or, if they are allowed back in, trying them for treason?

Mr Wallace: My hon. Friend makes an important point and reminds us that we have to balance everyone’s rights—the rights of my constituents to go about their business securely and safely and their right to life against the rights of other people to a fair trial and not to be subject to torture and other conditions. There are no easy solutions. Where we find we have the powers to deal with individuals we explore all of them, including deprivation of citizenship, royal prerogatives to prevent people travelling and prosecuting people in a United Kingdom court, as we have done in some cases where we have the evidence to do so. We recognise that over many decades there has been a deficiency in offences on the statute book such as in extra-territorial legislation; sometimes we might have evidence of travel but the intelligence cannot be submitted in court. That is why in the Counter-Terrorism and Border Security Bill, which I am pleased to say the Opposition support, we have sought to improve the statute book so that we do not face problems like this in the future.

Patrick Grady (Glasgow North) (SNP): The Government are tying themselves in knots over this. If it is the Government’s position, as the FCO reaffirmed yesterday on World Day Against the Death Penalty, that they oppose the use of the death penalty in all circumstances as a matter of principle, it stands to reason that, no matter how heinous and barbaric the alleged crimes are—and they are—if individuals are brought to justice, they should be not subject to the death penalty.

If that is the Government’s position, why are they not willing to state that clearly and seek the assurances from the US Government that others suggest we should ask for? What is the point of the special relationship if we cannot speak clearly and honestly to what is supposed to be our closest ally?

Can the Minister confirm whether the US or other allied countries were the subject of the two other cases that have been raised in which assurances were not sought?

Mr Wallace: It is the policy of this Government to seek justice for the victims, in accordance with not only our principles but the OSJA guidance, which is the published policy of this Government, introduced under the coalition Government in 2011. I asked whether I had received any representations from any Member of the House on the OSJA guidance while I have been Security Minister or whether my predecessor had. I have not seen anybody take issue with that guidance.

Our key aim is to seek justice. Our preference for Mr Elsheikh, for example, would have been to seek justice in this country if we had the evidence. The CPS was clear that it did not have the evidence to try them in this country. That was a challenge for us. Opposition Members say, “We want to see justice for everyone,” but I have yet to hear a solution from them or what they would do in this type of case, other than to just let these people go who would ultimately wreak havoc and death on the streets of Syria, Iraq or the United Kingdom.

Bob Blackman (Harrow East) (Con): I congratulate my right hon. Friend on his answers so far. Can he give us an assurance that under this Government, Britain will not be a safe haven for terrorists or those suspected of terrorism? What further action can he take to exclude people seeking admission to this country who are suspected of terrorist offences?

Mr Wallace: Every week, I see cases of exclusions. We exclude people in line with the legislation. If they are from the EU, we have some powers to exclude, and if they are from outside the EEA, we have more powers to exclude. We exclude people and, as I said, deprive people of their citizenship where the intelligence evidence points to the fact that either there is no alternative or they pose a considerable threat.

The biggest challenge for the future is safe spaces—people’s ability to communicate through end-to-end encryption, go online or go to a warzone such as north Syria, where they can play a part in planning and directing attacks. We, as a country, have very little reach into those places, either to affect behaviour or indeed get justice delivered. One of the biggest challenges in this case is that the detention of these individuals is not by a state; it is by a non-state actor in a prison in north Syria, which is a warzone. That is a real barrier to what we can do in the pursuit of justice for the victims of the crimes that these people are accused of.

Yasmin Qureshi (Bolton South East) (Lab): May I remind the House that this urgent question is about the death penalty? People are against the death penalty either because it is inhumane or because there could be a miscarriage of justice, and we should remember that. We either believe in the death penalty or we do not. We do not have the death penalty in this country, which means that whenever we deal with these issues, we must at all times seek assurance that there will be no death penalty. That is the question here.

Mr Wallace: As I said earlier, this Government, the coalition Government and the Labour Government before it have, in exceptional circumstances or where there are strong reasons, not sought death penalty assurances. That has been the long-standing position of successive Governments under the OSJA. That is partly because, while we oppose the death penalty in principle, we have to balance the options on the table.
These two individuals are not United Kingdom citizens in this country; they are in a country where there is a war. People seem to forget that. If they were in this country, the courts would have much more power to gather evidence, put them on trial and so on, but they are not, and therefore we are guided by the OSJA, published in 2011 under the coalition Government. It seems, having looked through previous records, that other Governments have on occasions viewed something as exceptional or having strong reasons not to seek death penalty assurances.

Mr Wallace: The hon. Gentleman makes a valid point. MLAs, which are often operational and judicial processes, are incredibly sensitive until they are aired, such as in a case or a hearing, as we saw at the beginning of the week with the case of the two individuals in Syria. That is partly because to publicly air the details of an investigation or an MLA request and our police asking for that information, which could be about someone in the hon. Gentleman’s constituency who is under investigation, could expose the fact that there was an investigation into that individual.

It is a delicate balance. However, I will agree to look at this, and I am happy to meet the hon. Gentleman to discuss whether there is a way in which we can give details of cases once they have passed and it is felt that there is no risk, and to see what more we can do to scrutinise the practice of MLAs. To put them in context, there are hundreds of them every year.

Mr Wallace: I understand the hon. Lady’s point about our values. As a former soldier, I have stood and upheld those values in pressing times, when the enemy or indeed the local population are very hostile; it is about us being better than them. In this specific case, however, the two individuals are not in our control; we cannot extradite them, move them or control them. This is about evidence—could we share evidence with another country, with an independent judiciary and the rule of law, that sought justice for its victims? The decision was made, based on our guidance, that in this case there was strong reason to do so without seeking a death penalty assurance.

Chris Elmore: On 23 July, the Minister told the House: “On Guantanamo Bay, again our position has not changed. The UK Government’s long-standing position is that the detention facility at Guantanamo Bay should close. Where we share evidence with the US, it must be for the express purpose of progressing a criminal prosecution, and we have made that clear to the United States.”

Can the Minister confirm that, contrary to that statement, the Home Secretary decided in this case not to ask for any assurances that the men will not be sent to Guantanamo Bay detention centre?

Mr Wallace: I have to disappoint the hon. Gentleman. When the agreement on the MLA was made, it was stated clearly that if any other use of the evidence was requested, they would have to come back here to get permission for that use. The Government’s stated policy is to oppose Guantanamo Bay detention—[Interruption.] Hang on. “Any other use” covers every use they would like to make of the evidence other than a judicial trial. It was clear that for every use other than a judicial trial, they would have to come back and seek permission, and our position on Guantanamo Bay is clear. I made it clear in my meeting with the Department of Justice in April or May, that if they were to come back and their request was to do with Guantanamo Bay, permission would not be given. One can argue about whether we could have written back saying, “Not for Guantanamo Bay,” but we said “any other reason”, which could be Guantanamo Bay or going on holiday.

Dr David Drew: When I have made foreign visits to countries that still apply the death penalty, I have been proud to say that the British Government categorically oppose its use. Can I say that now?
Mr Wallace: Yes, the hon. Gentleman can say that. This case is obviously before the courts, but it was an evidential request for a criminal trial and we followed OSJA guidance back in 2011, which is better guidance than the non-existent guidance of the previous Labour Government.

Business of the House

11.25 am

Valerie Vaz (Walsall South) (Lab): Will the Leader of the House please give us the forthcoming business?

The Leader of the House of Commons (Andrea Leadsom): Welcome back everybody. The business for next week will include:

MONDAY 15 OCTOBER—Remaining stages of the Offensive Weapons Bill.

TUESDAY 16 OCTOBER—Consideration of Lords amendments of the Rating (Property in Common Occupation) and Council Tax (Empty Dwellings) Bill, followed by motion to approve a money resolution relating to the Overseas Electors Bill, followed by the Chairman of Ways and Means has named opposed private business for consideration.

WEDNESDAY 17 OCTOBER—Opposition day (17th allotted day). There will be a debate on universal credit followed by a debate on social care funding. Both debates will arise on an Opposition motion.

THURSDAY 18 OCTOBER—Debate on a motion on ending exploitation in supermarket supply chains, followed by debate on a motion on World Menopause Day 2018. The subjects for these debates were determined by the Backbench Business Committee.

FRIDAY 19 OCTOBER—The House will not be sitting.

This week is Baby Loss Awareness Week, and we held an excellent debate during which 18 colleagues made valuable contributions. I remind colleagues that the exhibition in the Upper Waiting Hall is still open for viewing. Today the Illegal Wildlife Trade conference returns to London. Having attended the last IWT conference in Vietnam as the Secretary of State for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs, I am delighted to see the progress that we as a country are making in helping to stamp out that appalling trade. Today is also International Day of the Girl, and during this centenary year of some women getting the vote, it is important that we support and encourage every girl to reach her full potential.

Valerie Vaz: I thank the Leader of the House for the forthcoming business.

“Mamma Mia!”, Mr Speaker, we have only four days of business, and nothing for the week after. If this was an exam paper, the Government would have an “F” for fail. I do not know whether the Leader of the House knows something that we do not when she said that “a week changes a lot.” I do not know whether she was referring to the Business of the House, or to whether the PM will lead her party into the next election. She could have said that the Prime Minister is a “Super Trouper.”

Is it too much to ask for the dates of the February and Easter recesses? I will give the Leader of the House a clue: Easter is on 21 April, so it cannot be difficult to work recess dates around that. Will she press the Government on fixing those dates? It seems that the Government are breaking conventions and are in chaos. I do not know where you were, Mr Speaker, when you found out that the Budget will be on Monday 29 October,
but the date was on Twitter, which shows no courtesy to the House. The Government seem to be making it up as they go along.

I want to raise another breach of convention with the Leader of the House. My hon. Friend the Member for Plymouth, Sutton and Devonport (Luke Pollard) was not invited to the launch of a frigate in his constituency. He tried on a number of occasions to contact the Defence Secretary, but he was not invited. Later, it seems that the Defence Secretary was with Members of his own party, including the hon. Members for South West Devon (Mr Streeter), for South East Cornwall (Mrs Murray), and for Plymouth, Moor View (Johnny Mercer). Was it a ministerial or a private visit? My hon. Friend has a lot of correspondence, so could I ask the Leader of the House to look into the matter and provide him with a response?

More chaos and incompetence. The Secretary of State for Education was reprimanded on Monday by the UK Statistics Authority for his misuse of statistics, yet two days later the Prime Minister repeated the same statistics. Is anybody speaking to the Prime Minister to let her know about this issue? She said to the House that next year “per pupil funding is being protected in real terms.”—[Official Report, 10 October 2018; Vol. 647, c. 133.]

However, the Institute for Fiscal Studies found that per pupil funding is projected to fall in the next fiscal year. Will the Leader ensure that my hon. Friend the shadow Secretary of State for Education receives a response to her letter to the Prime Minister, and could the record be corrected? I am sure the Prime Minister would not want to mislead the House.

More chaos: the Government flagship policy on universal credit is causing real hurt to people. We now have the intervention of two former Prime Ministers. Half of all lone parents and two thirds of couples with children stand to lose £200 each month. Is that correct? That is what the Secretary of State for Work and Pensions allegedly said to the Cabinet. We want to know in this House whether that is true. We will be having an Opposition day debate on universal credit. I hope the Secretary of State for Work and Pensions will give us an impact assessment and clarify her remarks. More importantly, will the Leader of the House guarantee that the regulations for the migration to universal credit will be debated on the Floor of the House, and not in some upstairs Committee Room?

The Government are sticking their heads in the clouds—or in the ozone layer, while we still have one. Their response to the Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change report has been muted. The report said that unprecedented changes to limit global warming are needed across society and across the globe, yet the Government are continuing to reduce feed-in tariffs, next generation tariffs and export tariffs. May we have an urgent debate on this issue? One of the greatest gifts we can leave to the next generation is to act now on climate change. This is not a short-term game.

We have had our last summer in the EU. We all agree with the leader of the Democratic Unionist party, when she said: “What we need to see is the legal text.”

Yes—her and everybody else. We all want to see the text on what the backstop will be for a border in Northern Ireland. And I am sure the Prime Minister will want to update the House on discussions with Gibraltar.

Finally, Mr Speaker, I want to thank you for your statement on Tuesday. The verdict from the inquest into the innocent victims who died in the Westminster attack was announced on Wednesday, sadly on the same day that the Prime Minister gave her speech to the Tory party conference. I do not think it was mentioned in that speech. I want to add my condolences to the families and friends of PC Keith Palmer and the other innocent victims of the attack. It cannot have been easy to relive that day in public. I am sure the House can agree, in consultation with PC Keith Palmer’s family, on a suitable prominent memorial to him.

Andrea Leadsom: I would like to start by echoing the hon. Lady’s tribute to PC Palmer and by paying tribute to the courage of his family and friends in what they had to go through in the inquest. It was the most appalling and harrowing story. For many who were involved, either as witnesses or just being in lockdown in this place, as so many of us were, it was a horrible reminder of what happened. I would like to reassure everybody that the security not only of those who work here but those who protect us is absolutely paramount. There have been a number of meetings that you, Mr Speaker, and I have held and taken part in, which seek to ensure that we do everything possible to keep people here safe. I thank the hon. Lady for her remarks.

The hon. Lady calls the Prime Minister a super trouper. I have to agree. I think that would be a good way to describe her. This is an extraordinarily difficult and delicate time in the Brexit negotiations and the Prime Minister has shown her commitment to getting a good deal for the United Kingdom and for the EU27. I think we should all stick with her and allow her the room to be able to fulfil those negotiations.

The hon. Lady asks about Christmas and Easter recess dates. I absolutely assure her that I will give those to the House as soon as possible.

The hon. Lady mentions the launch of a frigate to which her hon. Friend was not invited. I will happily investigate that and if her hon. Friend wants to write to me, I can take it up on their behalf. Otherwise, I will respond to the hon. Lady directly.

The hon. Lady asks about the Department for Education’s statistics. What I can say to her is that the proportion of children in schools whose last Osted judgment was good or outstanding has risen from 66% in 2010 to 86% in March 2018. That is really good news for young people’s skills and getting a good education. That translates as 1.9 million more children in good or outstanding schools than in 2010. All hon. Members should be delighted by that—I know I am.

The hon. Lady asked about universal credit. I encourage her not to believe everything she reads in the press. As my right hon. Friend the Secretary of State for Work and Pensions has made clear, we are ensuring that nobody sees a reduction in their benefits when they move on to universal credit. Some £3.1 billion in transitional protection is being provided.

The hon. Lady asked about the report from the UN Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change. She is absolutely right that it is a really key report. It should act as a rallying cry for Governments around the world to innovate, invest and raise ambition to avert catastrophic climate change. But we should all be proud that in the
UK we are showing that carbon abatement and prosperity can go hand in hand. We lead the world in clean growth; we have cut our emission by more than 40% since 1990 while growing our economy by more than two thirds.

There is therefore much to be pleased about and to celebrate. I wish that hon. Members would look at the good news and not only what they read as bad news. They should celebrate some of the achievements that the UK is promoting, including today, the first day of our international conference on the illegal wildlife trade, where the UK has much to be proud of.

Sir David Amess: Will my right hon. Friend find time for a debate on the mis-selling of life insurance policies to the over-50s? Too often our constituents find that they have been paying more into the schemes than they will actually receive on their death, and if they try to cancel the policy they lose everything.

Andrea Leadsom: My hon. Friend raises an important matter that will be of interest to his constituents and many others. What I can tell him is that with a whole-of-life insurance plan a buyer chooses to pay a fixed premium at the outset of the policy. That is then payable until death, with a guaranteed cash amount paid out on death, which means that such policies pay out regardless of whether or not the buyer has paid less or more in total than the lump sum advertised. However, if his constituent feels that the arrangements entered into were unclear or misleading at the time, my hon. Friend should certainly contact the Financial Conduct Authority on their behalf.

Pete Wishart: Thank the Leader of the House for announcing the business for next week. Well, it looks as though the shortest romance in political history is coming to an acrimonious end. With the romance forged in the passion of a £1 billion dowry, how could the Government possibly have resisted the abundant charms of the cuddly Democratic Unionist party? Now it is to be sunk by a border between them as deep as the Irish sea, as these star-crossed political lovers will now bring themselves down as well as the country. May we therefore have an urgent debate on party political partner counselling to see whether there is anything we could possibly do to rekindle some romance in that very special relationship?

What are we going to do about Chequers, the EU deal that now must not be mentioned, except of course in the context of “chuck” from the Brexiteers on the Government Back Benches? Before the conferences recess, Chequers was all the Government went on about, but now there is nothing—zilch; nada. Apparently there is to be a vote on whatever deal is on offer, if there is one. It is probably the most important debate and vote that this House will undertake in a generation, and it could be in a few short weeks’ time. It would be totally unacceptable if the vote is put on a “take it or we burn the house down, no-deal, leave it” basis. Can the Leader of the House therefore give us her view on how the debate will be framed, what sort of motion there will be and what options will be available to the House?

Andrea Leadsom: I am sure that my right hon. Friend and I would agree about the need to deliver more new homes so that people are able to have a home of their own, but it is also important to be clear that local authorities would have to show that they have exhausted all other reasonable options, including brownfield and joint projects with neighbouring authorities, before they could tackle the green belt. He is right to prioritise
Mr Speaker: I very much hope that the right hon. Gentleman enjoyed his answer from the Leader of the House as much as I enjoyed both question and answer.

Chris Bryant (Rhondda) (Lab): How will we know?

Mr Speaker: Well, we will not know, but the right hon. Gentleman is smiling and looks content. I notice that some observers were much smitten by his eloquence, and we are deeply obliged to him.

Dame Louise Ellman (Liverpool, Riverside) (Lab/Co-op): Many of my constituents are suffering because of the way in which assessments for personal independence payments are being made. There is growing concern as universal credit is to be rolled out across Liverpool. Will a Minister make a statement about what is actually happening on the ground, rather than taking cover in generalised statements that often hide the reality of acute hardship for people in need?

Andrea Leadsom: The hon. Lady raises an incredibly important issue. She will be aware that Work and Pensions questions will take place on Monday 15 October, and there will be an Opposition day debate on universal credit on Wednesday. She will also be aware that the Government are spending more than £50 billion a year on benefits to support disabled people and people with health conditions. That is a record high, and up more than £9 billion in real terms since 2010. However, we all have constituency cases on these issues and we seek to raise them directly with the Department, which is always responsive. I encourage her to raise particular issues directly with Ministers.

Dr Andrew Murrison (South West Wiltshire) (Con): The Leader of the House will be aware that Northern Ireland has been without proper government since January 2017. News of a Northern Ireland Bill that will give the Secretary of State significant new powers is very welcome, but can she say when it will be published, and what timetable she envisages to ensure that it is given proper scrutiny in this place?

Andrea Leadsom: As my hon. Friend knows, our absolute priority is to secure a basis for political talks and to re-establish at the earliest possible opportunity a locally elected, democratically accountable devolved Government who work for everyone in Northern Ireland. As he says, a Bill to facilitate certain decision making in Northern Ireland is under consideration. It will be published shortly, and there will of course be ample opportunity for the House to consider it.

Mr Speaker: I call the Chair of the Backbench Business Committee, Mr Ian Mearns.

Ian Mearns (Gateshead) (Lab): As always, Mr Speaker, I am very grateful.

I thank the Leader of the House for her business statement, and for mentioning Monday’s very important and moving debate to mark Baby Loss Awareness Week. On the same day, owing to time pressure from other business, we lost a second debate on the important subject of children’s services, which must now be rescheduled.

I note that the Leader of the House did not tell us what would be happening during the week beginning 22 October. We already know that the Budget debate will begin on 29 October and culminate on 1 November, which means that there will be no Back-Bench business during that week. Will the Leader of the House try to secure some time for the week beginning 22 October? There is one time-sensitive debate—an important debate about Spina Bifida and Hydrocephalus Awareness Week—that we hope can be slotted in, and if we could be given some time during that week, we should be very grateful.

Andrea Leadsom: Of course I am always very keen to hear about the priorities of the Backbench Business Committee, and I always seek to provide time for its debates whenever I can. It was very unfortunate that Tuesday’s debate on children’s social care could not take place, but I am sure that the hon. Gentleman will find another opportunity to schedule it, and I will certainly help as much as I am able to.

Douglas Ross (Moray) (Con): On Christmas day last year, 15-year-old Abbie Main from Elgin died from a rare form of cancer. She had lived with that for more than four years, and during her time with the condition her wish was to raise money for, in her own words, “hospitals and stuff”—under the name “Abbie’s Sparkle Foundation”. So far the foundation has raised thousands of pounds, which it has distributed locally and nationally. Last weekend, Abbie’s 18-year-old brother, Cameron, scaled Ben Nevis five times in 24 hours, in terrible conditions—wind-chill temperatures were as low as minus 12°C—and raised £6,000 for Abbie’s Sparkle Foundation. May we have a debate to celebrate all our great local fundraisers, and also to commend inspirational young people such as Abbie Main, who came up with that foundation at such a difficult time in her far too short life?

Andrea Leadsom: I am in awe. What a fantastic family they must be, given that Abbie gave such a commitment and inspirational lead, and her brother achieved such an incredible feat. I am sure that I could not have managed to scale Ben Nevis even five times, let alone the seven that he sought to achieve.

We owe a huge debt of gratitude to so many charities throughout the United Kingdom. My hon. Friend, who is a great champion for his constituency, might well want to seek a Back-Bench debate so that we could congratulate all those who do so much on a voluntary basis.

Paula Sherriff (Dewsbury) (Lab): This is Breast Cancer Awareness Month. During the recess, a group of women from Mirfield, in my constituency, held a “half monty” event. They had all been touched by breast cancer, and some had suffered from it themselves. They “dared to bare”, raising more than £10,000 for local cancer charities. Some showed off their mastectomy scars for the first time. It was an incredibly emotional but, equally, phenomenal evening. Will the Leader of the House join
me in congratulating those amazing women, and may we have a debate about breast cancer, given that this is Breast Cancer Awareness Month?

**Andrea Leadsom:** The hon. Lady raises an incredibly important issue. I have family members who have been affected by it, and I can absolutely imagine the courage that it would take to “dare to bare”, as she puts it. I strongly encourage her to seek a Westminster Hall debate, for instance, so that all Members can share their constituents’ experiences.

**Andrew Jones** (Harrogate and Knaresborough) (Con): Local post offices are typically independent private businesses and they provide important and valuable services to their communities. They draw their income from the post office services they provide, and while they have other income streams to try to make sure that they are viable, they can still fail. May we have a debate about the importance of local post offices and what can be done to ensure continuity of service when a business, such as the Cold Bath Road post office my constituency, fails?

**Andrea Leadsom:** My hon. Friend often raises significant constituency issues, and I am sorry to hear about the closure of that post office in his area. He is right to highlight the fantastic job that post offices do in all our communities, including providing basic banking services when bank branches shut down. I encourage him to seek a Westminster Hall debate so that all colleagues can make contributions on what more can be done to ensure that post offices are sustainable.

**John Cryer** (Leyton and Wanstead) (Lab): Further to the question asked by my hon. Friend the shadow Leader of the House, surely any debate on universal credit should, given current circumstances, be in Government time, not Opposition time. We are all dealing with its deleterious consequences, which are affecting the poorest and most vulnerable of our constituents. Will the right hon. Lady give one assurance that any regulations relevant to UC will be debated here on the Floor of the House, not upstairs?

**Andrea Leadsom:** First, I think all hon. Members must acknowledge that universal credit is a better, simpler, more flexible system that is helping more people into work. It is absolutely the case that many people found the old system incredibly complicated, involving numerous claims to repay benefits that they had received. This is a simpler system that supports people getting into work, and the evidence is that it is succeeding.

The hon. Gentleman asks whether any statutory instruments can be debated in the Chamber. He will be aware that there are procedures for the Opposition to work within the usual channels to seek such an agreement. He will also be aware that this Government have given more time in the Chamber for debates on statutory instruments than any Government since the early 1990s.

**Alec Shelbrooke** (Elmet and Rothwell) (Con): I want to raise a serious matter. I look for a statement from the relevant Minister at the Ministry of Housing, Communities and Local Government on the democratic functions of local authorities following a sham situation on Harrogate Borough Council. A panel of elected councillors refused a planning application by 11 votes to one for an inappropriate development on the border of Wetherby in my constituency, only for a locum legal adviser, Noel Scanlon, to tell councillors they had reached the wrong decision, forcing them to vote again, but not before a private meeting away from the public gaze had been held. The original result was then overturned by nine-nil in favour. I fear that we are heading towards a situation in which if mandarins do not get their own way, they simply call for further votes to overturn the decision they did not like.

**Andrea Leadsom:** My hon. Friend, who is a strong champion for his constituency, is right to raise what sounds like a very frustrating situation. He will appreciate that I cannot comment on that specific planning case, but I can tell him that although planning committee members are not obliged to follow the recommendations of officers, the law does require that planning decisions are made in accordance with the development plan unless material considerations indicate otherwise, so local opposition or support is not in itself a ground for refusing or granting planning permission unless for valid planning reasons. My hon. Friend might want to seek an Adjournment debate to discuss the specific case directly with Ministers.

**Debbie Abrahams** (Oldham East and Saddleworth) (Lab): Given today’s intervention by Sir John Major, the former Conservative Prime Minister, which absolutely slams the roll-out of universal credit in spite of what the Leader of the House has said, will the Leader of the House reveal whether the draft regulations—not what is in the press—will be amended before they come to this House, and whether, as my hon. Friends have asked, the damage being done now, let alone the damage that will be done next year, cannot be overestimated.

**Andrea Leadsom:** I say again to the hon. Lady that the Government are determined to continue with the roll-out of universal credit because it is helping more people back into work. [Interruption.] The Government have also, however, been determined to improve the system as we roll it out, which is why it has been piloted. Following lessons learned from the pilot roll-outs, we have raised advances to 100% of the first month’s payment; we have made it quicker and easier to get those payments so that anybody who needs it can get paid on the very first day of their claim; we have scrapped the seven-day waiting period; and we have formed a new partnership with Citizens Advice to help people to claim universal credit. All these measures have been taken as a result of the sensible proposals made in this place and by constituents. Nevertheless, the roll-out will take place, and we are making sure that no one sees a reduction in their benefits when they are moved on to universal credit.

**Andrew Bowie** (West Aberdeenshire and Kincardine) (Con): Two weeks ago, at the Aberdeen and Grampian chamber of commerce Northern Star business awards, I was delighted that two companies in my constituency, Macphie of Glenbervie and Glen Tanar Estate, were...
recognised as finalists for the work that they do with local schoolchildren. I am pleased to say that Glen Tanar Estate won for the work that it does with Aboyne Academy. Will my right hon. Friend recommend a means by which such companies, which do so much for communities and young people across the UK, can be recognised at national level?

Andrea Leadsom: My hon. Friend is a great champion for his constituency, and as he knows, raising those excellent achievements in this place gives recognition to those businesses that are truly helping their communities. I suggest that those enterprises could apply for the 2020 Queen’s awards for enterprise, which the Department for Business, Energy and Industrial Strategy manages on behalf of the Crown. I particularly suggest that they could be eligible under the promoting opportunity category.

Nick Smith (Blaenau Gwent) (Lab): Capita has failed to bring in 90% of the recruits that our Army needs. This shocking performance undermines the defence of our country. May we have a statement from the Government urgently, setting out how they will ensure that our Army gets the soldiers necessary for our security?

Andrea Leadsom: I was unaware of the important issue that the hon. Gentleman has raised. I encourage him in the first instance to raise the matter of Capita with Ministers at the Department for Business, Energy and Industrial Strategy on Tuesday 16 October. There will be a further opportunity to raise the matter on Monday 22 October in Defence questions.

Bob Blackman (Harrow East) (Con): Yesterday was the International Day of the Homeless, and the Secretary of State took the opportunity to announce the use of the £20 million fund towards the national rental deposit scheme. Also, Crisis, the well-known charity for the homeless, announced its report on how we can end homelessness once and for all. May we have a debate in Government time on all the projects that the Government are implementing to end homelessness in this country?

Andrea Leadsom: First, I should like to pay tribute again to my hon. Friend for his Homelessness Reduction Act 2017, which the Government were proud to support. It creates new duties on public bodies, from the NHS to prisons, to enable interventions at an earlier stage to prevent homelessness. That is absolutely vital. He is right to point out the 48 projects right across the country that the Government are supporting to try to prevent rough sleeping. It is unacceptable that we have people sleeping rough in this country, and the Government are committed to stamping it out once and for all.

Judith Cummins (Bradford South) (Lab): This week has been a bumper week for Bradford. First, our rugby league news: the Bradford Bulls were returned to the championship. Secondly, this is the very first Bradford Manufacturing Week. Will the Leader of the House join me in congratulating the Bulls, and all those involved in Bradford Manufacturing Week? May we have a debate in Government time on the skills that young people need to access manufacturing jobs?

Andrea Leadsom: I am grateful to the hon. Lady for raising those fantastic achievements. She is a great champion for her constituency, and I am delighted to join her in congratulating the Bradford Bulls and all those involved in Bradford Manufacturing Week. She has raised the important issue of what more we can do to give young people the skills they need to get into those valuable manufacturing jobs, and I absolutely encourage her to seek an Adjournment debate so that she can take this up directly with Ministers.

Andrew Selous (South West Bedfordshire) (Con): May we have an urgent debate on how an insurance company, such as Hastings Direct, can get away with selling a £15,000 car that it neither owned nor insured? A great injustice has been done to one of my constituents.

Andrea Leadsom: I am sorry to hear about that, and I am grateful to my hon. Friend. Friend for raising the matter in the Chamber. I obviously cannot comment on the specifics, but the Financial Ombudsman Service should provide proportionate and prompt resolution of any such case. It is vital that insurers treat customers fairly, and every firm is required to do so under Financial Conduct Authority rules, so he may like to take up this specific case directly with the FCA on his constituent’s behalf.

Ian C. Lucas (Wrexham) (Lab): May we have an urgent debate on predatory business takeovers? Until yesterday, constituents of mine had been taking forward a business called DTCC—originally called Avox—for 10 years, but a company called Refinitiv has taken over the business, immediately making 300 people redundant and offshoring the jobs to India. May we have an urgent discussion about appalling business practices that put people on the scrapheap when they have worked so hard for so many years?

Andrea Leadsom: I am sorry to hear about the company in the hon. Gentleman’s constituency. The situation is worrying, and I encourage him to take the matter up directly with Ministers from the Department for Business, Energy and Industrial Strategy at BEIS questions next Tuesday to hear what more they can do to help support those who have been told that they are losing their jobs.

Jeremy Lefroy (Stafford) (Con): Staffordshire County Council, like many others, faces a substantial deficit in 2019-20 as a result of the rise in social care costs for both children and adults. May we have a debate on all the ways that the Government can assist councils, such as through business rates retention, the relaxation of the referendum rules, the rate support grant and the better care fund? All those things could help to narrow or eliminate the gap that will otherwise result in many vital local services being removed across the country.

Andrea Leadsom: My hon. Friend raises an important issue that affects many constituencies, and he will be aware that we have short-term and longer-term plans for social care. In the short term, we have announced an additional £2 billion for adult social care, which will help to free up 2,000 to 3,000 acute hospital beds. We have also announced £240 million for social care to ease pressures during the winter, which will, for example, help to buy up to 72,000 domestic care packages to support people in their own homes. As for his specific concerns about Staffordshire, I encourage him to seek an Adjournment debate to raise them directly with Ministers.
several times to raise legitimate constituent concerns, and I contacted Mr Simon Stevens, chief executive of NHS England, about a cross-border constituent concern on the advice of the Secretary of State for Health and Social Care, but both appear to have ignored legitimate concerns raised by MPs on the behalf of their constituents. Will the Leader of the House make a statement on the unacceptable delay of both public and private bodies refusing to engage with MPs who seek to present constituents’ concerns about important matters?

Andrea Leadsom: The hon. Lady is right that all bodies, whether public or private, should give a proper response to MPs carrying out the legitimate process of representing their constituents, so I completely sympathise with her. If she would like to write to me about it, I can try to take the matter up on her behalf.

Mark Pawsey (Rugby) (Con): It is tremendous that this Government are making an extra £394 million a week available for our NHS, but there remains a role for hospital charities, such as the Friends of St Cross, Rugby’s local hospital. Since 1955, the charity has donated valuable equipment and facilities to improve the patient experience, and I spent time with some of its 200 volunteers only last week. May I join my hon. Friend the Member for Moray (Douglas Ross) in encouraging the Government to arrange a debate to support volunteers in this important sector?

Andrea Leadsom: My hon. Friend is right to raise this issue. Volunteers have played a long and crucial role in supporting the NHS to care for patients and deliver services, and he is right to want to want to acknowledge the superb work of the Friends of St Cross and all volunteers as we celebrate the 70th birthday of the NHS. May I thank all volunteers on behalf of all hon. Members for their great contribution to our wonderful NHS?

Stephanie Peacock (Barnsley East) (Lab): Last week, I visited Jump Primary School, which has been working on the Send My Friend to School campaign. Do the Government endorse that campaign and may we have a debate in Government time about protecting students and teachers who are caught up in armed conflict around the world?

Andrea Leadsom: At my party conference, I was delighted to meet some students who are taking part in the Send My Friend to School campaign, so we are certainly very aware of it, and we support the excellent volunteering that goes on there. I am very glad that the hon. Lady has raised this issue; and of course, the Government do a huge amount on behalf of the United Kingdom to support all young people in getting the opportunity of an education wherever they are around the world.

Robert Courts (Witney) (Con): SpecialEffect, a wonderful West Oxfordshire charity that seeks to improve the lives of those living with severe disabilities through cutting-edge technology and video games, recently held its largest games industry funding event of the calendar year, called One Special Day. Thanks to the support of the worldwide gaming industry, it has raised more than £300,000. This money will go a long way towards supporting SpecialEffect’s phenomenal work and help it to transform the lives of young people. Will the Leader of the House join me in paying tribute to everyone at SpecialEffect and may we have a debate on how new technologies can be harnessed to improve the lives of those living with a disability?

Andrea Leadsom: I congratulate SpecialEffect—what a fantastic achievement. I also congratulate my hon. Friend, who I know has been a long-term supporter of this great charity. He is right to point out that small local charities make a huge contribution to communities across the country, and the Government are committed to supporting their independence and sustainability. I wish SpecialEffect the very best success in the future.

Gareth Thomas (Harrow West) (Lab/Co-op): It is almost 100 years since the first Co-op party MP, Alf Waterson, was elected to this House. Notwithstanding the very strong support that Labour colleagues and others in the House show for much of the Co-op party’s political agenda, as we are the third largest political grouping in the House, is it not time that we were allocated an extra dedicated Opposition day debate?

Andrea Leadsom: I will look into that.

Chris Stephens (Glasgow South West) (SNP): May I draw to the Leader of the House’s attention early-day motion 1662, celebrating the work of the African Arts Centre in Ibrox in the Glasgow South West constituency? [That this House notes the work of the African Arts Centre; based in Ibrox, Glasgow, a charity organisation that aims to support, develop and empower communities through visual and performing arts; praises the organisation for the work it does on social inclusion with the youths of Govan, Ibrox and surrounding areas to try to tackle isolation using creativity as a vehicle for communication; congratulates the organisation on successfully securing £7,000 funding from National Lottery Award for All Scotland Grant from Creative Scotland to deliver 52 art workshops, two art exhibitions and to develop a website which will showcase events and artwork; and wishes them success with all its future projects and events.]

I visited the centre last week and saw a fantastic arts exhibition to commemorate Black History Month. May we have a debate or a statement from the Government on how they are commemorating Black History Month, to allow Members of Parliament to celebrate the work of the African community, not forgetting the burning injustices of the past, particularly the western world’s role in the slave trade?

Andrea Leadsom: I thank the hon. Gentleman for raising the issue and congratulate his constituents who are celebrating African art and the history, which is so important and is often best expressed through art. I commend him for raising the role of the western world in the slave trade, and we are so proud to have also had a part in ending the slave trade. He might well want to seek a Back-Bench business debate so that all hon. Members can contribute that discussion.

Mrs Madeleine Moon (Bridgend) (Lab): My constituent Colin Edwards died last Thursday in St Thomas’s Hospital despite excellent care. That contrasted with the callous indifference his wife and family experienced at Lambeth Town Hall when they tried to register the death. Over
two days, they were turned away. They returned to Wales, where the Bridgend registrar registered the death and sent the details to Lambeth. They received no replies. They tried desperately to receive the death certificates. They contacted me and I emailed the chief executive, and today they have been promised that they will have death certificates tomorrow so that Mr Edwards can return to Wales to be buried sometime next week. The family have been traumatised by this difficulty. They would like a debate on why in an electronic age we cannot register deaths in the home that the person comes from with a communication sent electronically to where the person died, so that families are not traumatised in this way and met with indifference that adds to their grief.

**Andrea Leadsom:** I am genuinely sorry to hear about the experience of the Edwards family, as that is really unacceptable and appalling; this House sends our condolences to them for their loss and for the way in which they have been treated. The hon. Lady raises an important question and she may well wish to seek an Adjournment debate, so that she can raise this specific case directly with Ministers.

**Ben Lake** (Ceredigion) (PC): May we have a debate in Government time on the implications for public authorities of the Treasury’s draft valuation directions for non-funded pension schemes? The changes to the SCAPE—superannuation contributions adjusted for past experience—discount rate are a particular concern in Wales, as it is unclear where the funding will come from to pay for the increased employer contribution rates for the teacher, firefighter and local government pension schemes in 2019-20.

**Andrea Leadsom:** I am grateful to the hon. Gentleman for raising that question, and I encourage him to raise it directly with Ministers at Department for Work and Pensions questions on Monday.

**Christian Matheson** (City of Chester) (Lab): My trade union, Unite, has launched a period dignity campaign to encourage employers to provide a stock of women’s sanitary products for any of their employees or visitors who might need them during their period. May we have a debate about this? More pressingly, will the Leader of the House support my representations to the Independent Parliamentary Standards Authority to consider women’s menstrual products as we would consider soap or toilet paper: as something that could be provided on expenses in constituency offices?

**Andrea Leadsom:** The hon. Gentleman raises a sensible and practical suggestion that I am happy to take away. On the broader issue of businesses providing products to deal with menstrual periods, he makes an equally good suggestion. Obviously, the Government do not seek to legislate on every aspect of corporate life, but he may well wish to seek a debate so that he can discuss this with other MPs and raise the issue more broadly, so that sympathetic companies might choose to take this action unilaterally.

**Nic Dakin** (Scunthorpe) (Lab): As we celebrate another fantastic Ryder cup win, it is appropriate to reflect on the role of Scunthorpe’s Tony Jacklin. At a time when the Ryder cup was going through difficulty, he was instrumental in rejuvenating the cup, as its most successful captain ever. As the only British golfer to win both the British and US Opens, his is surely the sort of achievement worthy of a knighthood. May we have a statement on how the nation can properly recognise Tony Jacklin’s contribution to golf and wider public life?

**Mr Speaker:** He is a great British sporting hero—I remember him from my childhood. If I may be permitted, let me say from the Chair: what a splendid inquiry.

**Andrea Leadsom:** I must agree with you, Mr Speaker. I must also tell the hon. Gentleman that he will have made my son’s day, because he is a big fan of Tony Jacklin and the Ryder cup. The hon. Gentleman is right to point out that this year’s was something of a triumph, and we were all glued to our screens. He raises an important point and I recommend that he puts Tony Jacklin forward for an award—I am sure many Members from across the House might provide letters of support.

**Yasmin Qureshi** (Bolton South East) (Lab): There has been a record number of Islamophobic hate crimes, a disproportionate number of which have been attacks on women with headscarves or on gentlemen with beards. We have seen the rise of populism and nationalism, with Muslims often being the target. May we have a debate in Government time not only to discuss this issue, but to seriously consider how to tackle it?

**Andrea Leadsom:** The hon. Lady raises an incredibly important issue. Any type of hate crime is absolutely unacceptable. We have to stamp out all forms of discrimination that lead to hate crimes such as the ones to which she is referring. I encourage her to raise this issue at the next Justice questions, a few weeks from now, so that we can discuss how we address the issue of hate crimes and Islamophobia.

**Chris Elmore** (Ogmore) (Lab): As we celebrate another fantastic Ryder cup win, it is appropriate to reflect on the role of Scunthorpe’s Tony Jacklin. At a time when the Ryder cup was going through difficulty, he was instrumental in rejuvenating the cup, as its most successful captain ever. As the only British golfer to win both the British and US Opens, his is surely the sort of achievement worthy of a knighthood. May we have a statement on how the nation can properly recognise Tony Jacklin’s contribution to golf and wider public life?

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Mr Speaker: I call Chris Bryant.

Chris Bryant: Thank you, Mr Speaker. You are so kind. May we have a debate on parliamentary jiggery-pokery, particularly in relation to private Members’ Bills? A splendid private Member’s Bill, promoted by the hon. Member for East Worthing and Shoreham (Tim Loughton), is going forward in 10 days’ time, but the Government cannot decide what they are going to do about it. We would like them to support it.

There is another magnificent private Member’s Bill, promoted by my hon. Friend the Member for Manchester, Gorton (Afzal Khan), on parliamentary constituencies. It has strong support from Members from across the House, but the Government will not allow it to have a money resolution. Yet next Tuesday we are to have a debate to approve a money resolution relating to the Overseas Electors Bill, even though the Government cannot even get enough Members to serve on the Committee.

Andrea Leadsom: I would say to the second-priorityChris that I—[Interruption.] I am sorry, but it was Mr Speaker’s decision—what can I say?

Chris Bryant: If you change your mind, I’m the first in line.

Andrea Leadsom: I think you should clarify this matter, Mr Speaker. I would be happy to give way to you. [Interruption.] It appears that we do not want to delay and that Mr Speaker does not want to arbitrate on this matter.

I simply do not accept that the Government are blocking progress on private Members’ Bills—far from it. We have seen excellent progress on these Bills. As the hon. Gentleman points out, we will have the chance to debate a money resolution for the Overseas Electors Bill next week. The hon. Gentleman’s own Bill has received Royal Assent, as has the Parental Bereavement (Leave and Pay) Bill, which was promoted by my hon. Friend the Member for Thirsk and Malton (Kevin Hollinrake). We have had the money resolution for the Organ Donation (Deemed Consent) Bill, which has now completed its Committee stage. A huge number of private Members’ Bills are going through. In the 2005 Parliament, only 22 private Members’ Bills received Royal Assent, whereas 31 did in the 2010 Parliament—if we include the 2015-to-2017 Parliament, the number is more than double the number in the 2005 Parliament. We are making excellent progress.

Vicky Foxcroft (Lewisham, Deptford) (Lab): The Home Secretary announced at the Conservative party conference that the Government would be adopting a public health approach to youth violence. That is extremely important and Members will know that it is one of the recommendations from the Youth Violence Commission. All I want to know is: when are we going to have a debate on this?

Andrea Leadsom: The hon. Lady has been closely involved with the Government’s efforts on the serious violence taskforce and in bringing in a new crime reduction plan. She will be aware that a key focus for the taskforce has been prevention and ensuring that we avoid people getting into a life of crime and serious violence. I am not sure at the moment whether there will be a specific debate on that, but I will certainly take away her request. Obviously, she had a debate on this just last night and I am sure she was able to air her views then.

Alan Brown (Kilmarnock and Loudoun) (SNP): Last week, I met another constituent who was at the end of her tether with the Child Maintenance Service. My staff encounter the same poor service as my constituents: different advisers at each contact, conflicting information, wrong information, financial breakdowns that make no sense and the CMS not challenging the other partner sufficiently, with cases dragging on and on. The £50 compensation in some of these cases is insufficient for the stress caused. My office has even received information that breached data-protection laws. When we contact other MP helplines, they have real experts in resolution, but the CMS does not. When will there be a root-and-branch review of the CMS’s performance?

Andrea Leadsom: The hon. Gentleman raises an important constituency issue, as he often does, and he is right to do so. If he wishes to write to me, I can refer the matter directly to Ministers.

Jim Shannon (Strangford) (DUP): Following the failed coup in Turkey in July 2016, the Turkish Government began a crackdown on human rights in many sectors of Turkish society, including education. That led to Turkey demanding the forcible repatriation of some 285 Turkish teachers working in schools in Pakistan, along with their families. Despite that being in violation of international law, many teachers have been returned and have faced arbitrary arrest, detention, and even torture by Turkish authorities. This is just another example of the worsening situation under President Erdoğan, a fascist dictator and demagogue who has suppressed human rights and does not respect the rights of religious minorities. Will the Leader of the House agree to a statement or debate on this matter?

Andrea Leadsom: The hon. Gentleman often raises issues relating to the persecution of minorities, particularly on grounds of religious belief, and he is absolutely right to do so. I am aware that he has applied for a Back-Bench debate on International Freedom of Religion or Belief Day, and I sincerely hope that he gets the opportunity to share experiences, along with other Members, and to provide the focus so that the Government can respond.
Mr Paul Sweeney (Glasgow North East) (Lab/Co-op): I am grateful, Madam Deputy Speaker.

Will the Leader of the House join me in congratulating the local community in Dennistoun in my constituency? On 29 September, a new war memorial was unveiled in the area to commemorate, as we approach the centenary, more than 5,000 men who lost their lives in the first world war. I particularly congratulate Jim Watson, who led the fundraising drive to raise £17,000 for the memorial, which was designed by Owen McGuire, a 12-year-old schoolboy at St Mungo’s secondary school, and unveiled by 85-year-old Dick Gilmour, a veteran who served in the far east with the Cameronians (Scottish Rifles).

As we approach the centenary of the armistice, will the Leader of the House consider holding a debate in Government time on the legacy of the great war in communities throughout the country, particularly as the Dennistoun war memorial was subjected to a horrendous act of vandalism just before it was unveiled, showing that there is still a large amount of ignorance? People of all faiths and classes were involved in that war and their deaths were indiscriminate.

Andrea Leadsom: The hon. Gentleman is absolutely right to raise the enormous sacrifice of all those who gave their lives and, indeed, those who kept our country going during the great war. I join him in congratulating all those in his constituency who have contributed to the successful establishment of a war memorial to commemorate those who died. I certainly agree that we will need to ensure that we have appropriate ways to remember those who died in the first world war. On 31 October in Westminster Hall, the Bundestag choir and the Parliament choir will be singing together to commemorate world war one; Members will be very welcome to attend that event and to take part in the commemorations.

Rail Review: Terms of Reference

12.23 pm

The Secretary of State for Transport (Chris Grayling): I wish to update the House on the Government’s comprehensive rail review, which we intend to use to build on the challenges facing a busy railway and in particular to deliver a network that is fit for the future and better serves passengers. I shall also update the House on the current performance of Northern and GTR.

For a generation before the Railways Act 1993, British Rail was in seemingly terminal decline. Passenger numbers were falling, stations were closing and short-term decisions were being made at the expense of the travelling public. The 1993 Act brought investment, new services and better reliability. A quarter of a century later, the situation is very different. Our UK rail network is at capacity in commuter areas, with many of the most intensively used lines in Europe. On many routes, it is simply not possible to squeeze more trains on to the network. As we now know, the railways were not in fact in terminal decline; they had been starved of investment. The period of privatisation has reversed the decades of decline and heralded the fastest expansion of our railways since they were built by the Victorians. It has also delivered billions of pounds of investment and radically improved safety. Our railways are now among the safest in the world.

Nevertheless, that welcome expansion has brought new, acute challenges. On major commuter routes throughout the country, the trains are packed each morning. Network Rail, which represents a third of the industry, based on spend, is nationalised. It is also responsible for more than half the daily disruption. But no matter whether it is a failure of the track, a fault with a train or a customer incident, it is because there is little resilience or margin for error in the system that, when things go wrong, the knock-on effect can last for hours. The problem is compounded because the railway is run by multiple players without clear lines of accountability.

When I took over as Secretary of State for Transport in 2016, I said that change was needed and started the process of bringing together the operation of the tracks and trains, which was split up in the 1990s so that we had single operational teams. That process is helping to overcome problems caused by fragmentation in some areas and creating a railway that is more responsive to passenger needs. I also said that that change needed to be evolutionary and not revolutionary, to avoid destabilising the industry, so we have started to shape alliances between the teams running trains and the teams running track to create a more joined-up and customer-focused structure.

The difficulties with the introduction of the new timetable over the summer and the problems that we are experiencing with many major investment projects has convinced me that the process of evolution is no longer enough. The collapse of Virgin Trains East Coast has also highlighted the need for radical change. Put simply, we need that change to ensure that the investment going into the railways from both the Government and the private sector results in better services for passengers and delivers the improved reliability, better trains, extra seats and more-frequent services that we all want to see.
[Chris Grayling]

Last month, my Department announced a root-and-branch review of how the rail industry works. Keith Williams, the deputy chairman of John Lewis & Partners and former chief executive of British Airways, is to lead the work, and I expect him to make ambitious recommendations for reform to ensure that our rail network produces even greater benefits for passengers and continues to support a stronger, fairer economy. Keith Williams’ expertise in driving customer service excellence and workforce engagement will be incredibly valuable as we reform the rail industry to become more passenger focused.

Keith will be assisted by an independent expert panel from throughout the country, with expertise in rail, business and customer service. The panel will ensure that the review thinks boldly and creatively, challenging received wisdom, to ensure that its recommendations can deliver the stability and improvements that rail passengers deserve. It will be supported by a dedicated secretariat and will now begin to engage with the industry, passengers, regional and business representatives, and others throughout the country, drawing on their expertise, insights and experiences to inform the review.

The review will consider all parts of the rail industry, from the current franchising system and industry structures to accountability and value-for-money for passengers and taxpayers. It will consider further devolution and the needs of rail freight operators and will particularly take into account the final report of Professor Stephen Glaister on the May 2018 network disruption, which is due at the end of the year and to which I shall turn in a moment.

When we establish what we think is the right approach to mend our railways, it must be properly tested and scrutinised independently. I have today published the rail review’s terms of reference and placed copies in the Libraries of both Houses, together with the names of the review’s independent panel. The review will build a rigorous and comprehensive evidence base, and it will make recommendations regarding the most appropriate organisational and commercial framework for the sector that delivers our vision for a world-class railway. The private sector has an important part to play in shaping the future of the industry, but it is important that the review considers the right balance of public and private sector involvement.

Some have called for the return to a national, state-run monopoly, and for us to go back to the days of British Rail. There is an expectation that taking hundreds of millions of pounds of debt on to the Government books will magically resolve every problem. This fails to recognise that many of the problems that customers faced this year were down to the nationalised part of the railways. It also creates the false sense that a Government-controlled rebrand would somehow make every train work on time. Those who make this argument fail to tell passengers that the much-needed investment that is taking place today would be at risk, and that taxpayers’ money would be diverted from public services to subsidise losses.

The review will look at how the railway is organised to deliver for passengers. It will look forensically at the different options, and then make recommendations on what will best deliver results in different areas of the country. In autumn 2019, the review will conclude with a White Paper, which will set out its findings, and explain how we will deliver reform. We expect reform to begin from 2020, so passengers will see benefits before the next election.

I have commuted for most of my career—over 35 years—and I still do. I am proud to be in a Government who are supporting a major programme of investment in rail, from Thameslink to the TransPennine upgrade, with new trains in the north, south, east and west. However, we cannot stand by while the current industry structure struggles to deliver the improvements that this investment should be generating. So it is time for change.

The review will not prevent us taking every opportunity in the short term to improve passenger experiences. That is our focus and that is why we are committed to an investment of £48 billion in the railways over the next five years.

Professor Stephen Glaister’s interim report has provided us with an accurate account of the series of mistakes and complex issues across the rail industry that led to the unacceptable disruption that passengers experienced earlier this year. We know that, in the north, delays to infrastructure upgrades, beyond the control of Network Rail, were a major factor in the resulting disruption. Richard George, the former head of transport at the 2012 Olympics, is now working with the industry and Transport for the North to look at any underlying performance issues so that they can be properly addressed.

In the four weeks ending 15 September, in the Northern rail area, more than 85% of services met their punctuality targets; the highest level delivered for Northern rail’s passengers since the timetable introduction in May. Northern is now running 99% of the May timetable and is running more trains than were operating in that region before the May timetable. We are working with Transport for the North and the industry to plan further uplifts in services, while prioritising reliability.

In the coming months, passengers across the north will begin to benefit from the brand new trains that were unveiled last week. The first trains are now operating in parts of the Northern rail area. There will be more than 2,000 extra services a week. Every single Northern and TransPennine Express train will be brand new or refurbished as new, and every single one of the old Pacer trains will be gone.

I now want to turn to Govia Thameslink Railway, which has new leadership. The reliability of its services has improved significantly: since the introduction of the interim timetable in July, 85% of its trains arrived at their station on time, and that performance has been getting better. In addition, in the past week, the first of the new Class 717 trains that will run on its Great Northern routes began testing. GTR is now operating 94% of the weekday timetable that it intended to run from 20 May, including, crucially, all the services in the busiest peak hours. By December, it plans to introduce all planned off-peak services, but there is much more work to do to improve performance, particularly at weekends.

Since the disruption in May, there has been intense scrutiny from the Government and the regulator, the Office of Rail and Road, on what went wrong and why. GTR must take its fair share of the responsibility; its performance was below what we expect from our rail
operators. Officials in my Department are now taking action to finalise how we will hold GTR to account for the disruption. My hon. Friend the rail Minister will keep the House updated.

We need now to move forward and take action on these issues, particularly after the disruption that passengers experienced. We need to help passengers plan ahead; to ensure that we do everything we can to reduce delays and cancellations; and to ensure that we properly compensate disrupted fare payers. The review that I have announced today is very necessary. It will continue the approach and ensure that the rail industry is focused on putting the passenger first and that we maximise the benefits of this investment. The lesson of this summer is that it is now time for change and we will deliver that change.

12.33 pm

Andy McDonald (Middlesbrough) (Lab): I wish to thank the Secretary of State for advance sight of his statement, which was actually announced three weeks ago, on 20 September. Although the title of this statement is, “Rail Review: Terms of Reference”, he has not provided me with these terms or the names on the panel. Seemingly, the document sits in the Library, as yet unseen—a fat lot of use that is when we are here to discuss it.

The Department for Transport’s press releases are very fond of exaggerated claims, historical or otherwise, so the froth around the Secretary of State’s rail review announcement was to be expected. We were told that it would be “far-reaching”, “sweeping” and “root and branch”. Really? I am surprised that the Department did not say that it would be the most comprehensive rail review since the Victorian era, or since the time of Brunel, as it usually does. These absurd and ridiculous claims undermine rail policy debate and belie a tragic reality. His review is not far-reaching, sweeping or root and branch. It is none of those things. It is a predetermined prevarication and a way for him to cover up his disastrous failure to run the railway properly and to kick it into the long grass for a year. It offers precisely nothing to the millions of rail passengers who have endured months of misery since the timetabling crisis in May.

A Government review is one of the oldest tricks in the political book. It is usually a good way of kicking a difficult decision into the long grass, so fair play to him—or was it the Prime Minister’s idea? Under the Conservatives, over the past eight years, rail reviews have practically come along with the frequency of buses—McNulty, Brown, Shaw, Hendy, Bowe, Laidlaw, and Hansford. I could go on.

Is it not the truth that we do not need another review to tell us what is wrong with the railway? Why do we need a rail outsider to tell us what we know already? Is this the expertise that we need? Also, can the Secretary of State tell us how many days a month Keith Williams will contribute to the review? My sources tell me one day a month. Hardly worth the bother, is it? The fact that the permanent secretary at the Department for Transport was desperately ringing around retired rail executives urging them to join his review panel tells us something.

Does not this show that the Government are out of touch with the rail industry? What is more, the rail industry has called for public ownership to be considered as part of the review—it is the Rail Delivery Group if the Secretary of State wants the reference. This review has no credibility in the rail industry.

I know that the Minister told a conference fringe meeting in Birmingham last week that rail franchising is broken—I am pleased that we can both agree on something, but we differ on how to move forward. He thinks that bolting together operations and infrastructure into individual partnerships on the east coast or Southeastern is the way forward for rail. In fact, his review is simply a 12-month prelude to justifying this proposal, which no one in the rail industry takes seriously or thinks is workable. It is ironic that, as an ardent Brexiteer, he is doing so much to perpetuate a rail operation system that enriches those foreign Governments who own the majority of rail franchises. His review offers nothing for the private UK supply side businesses, which are the backbone of British industry. Will the rail industry consider the roles of the DFT or the ORR? Practically everything starts or finishes with the Department. Will he suspend all current franchise competitions while this review is underway—Southeastern, East Midlands and west coast? Will his Department return to the days of British Rail? Labour might give it a different name, but it will still be British Rail. The British public are crying out for an accountable railway. They are desperate for a system that is simpler and more efficient. Above all, our railways need to be run in public ownership for the public interest, and his review will do none of those things.

Chris Grayling: I keep hearing from the Opposition that returning to British Rail would deliver transformation for the British public.

Andy McDonald: I didn’t say that.

Chris Grayling: The hon. Gentleman says that he did not say that, but when he talks about an integrated state monopoly, what else is he talking about except for returning to the days of British Rail? Labour might give it a different name, but it will still be British Rail. The reality is that Labour Members cannot explain the benefits that their policy would actually bring, and their leader does not even know which part of the railway is privatised and which is nationalised. They say their policies will cost nothing, yet the Library says that even taking back control of the rolling stock will cost £17 billion. On the “World at One”, the shadow rail Minister could not even explain how Labour’s policy would work. [Interruption.]

Madam Deputy Speaker (Dame Eleanor Laing): Order. The hon. Member for Middlesbrough (Andy McDonald) must not shout at the Secretary of State; he has had his go and others will have a go in a minute.
Chris Grayling: The hon. Gentleman asked about supply-side businesses. Supply-side businesses in the UK are doing well at the moment because we are investing record amounts in infrastructure improvements and new technologies that will help performance on the railways. That is ensuring that we have a successful and now internationally competitive rail industry. The hon. Gentleman asked whether the review would look at the roles of the Department for Transport and the Office of Rail and Road. Absolutely; this is a root and branch review of the way the whole industry works.

The hon. Gentleman asked about franchises. As he knows I announced that information three weeks ago. I have taken the view that I do not want to remove the possibility of passenger benefits in the short-term—for example, the longer trains that I want to see on the Southeastern franchise. Therefore, I do not intend to halt a number of the franchises, but I have announced that I will not be going ahead with CrossCountry. Finally, he asked about costs in the industry. When I hear Labour Members line up with the consumer and insist that rail pay increases should be in line with the same inflation measure that everybody else uses, I will take them seriously on costs in the industry. But they do not; all they do is line up with the trade unions.

Tim Loughton (East Worthing and Shoreham) (Con): The Secretary of State alluded to the Glaister review, which was the last review that he commissioned. The interim report has revealed unmitigated incompetence from all parties involved—GTR, Network Rail and, I am afraid, the Department for Transport. How many more reviews, inquiries, investigations, statements and urgent questions will it take before GTR is at last stripped of its franchise, as all my constituents and those well beyond my constituency actually want?

Chris Grayling: As I said a moment ago, we are working through the final stages of our assessment of the position with GTR. The decisions that we take will be designed to deliver the best outcome for my hon. Friend’s constituents and other passengers. I do not want to take a decision that works against their interest, and I am happy to talk to him about ensuring that we get this right.

Alan Brown (Kilmarnock and Loudoun) (SNP): I thank the Secretary of State for early sight of his statement. During a previous statement on 4 June—after yet another rail shambles—I asked the Secretary of State to admit that the rail franchise system is broken and to do something to fix it. In that regard, I kind of welcome this review, as long as it is actually thorough and the Government abide by any conclusions that the system is broken and needs to be completely remodelled.

How are we going to get oversight of the rail experts who are needed to sit on the panel? After hearing the statement, I think that we can safely say that the term “rail expert” does not apply to the Secretary of State. Yet again, he argues that the new investment that came in after privatisation was somehow magically due to privatisation, not a change in Government rules that allowed private companies to borrow. Yet again, he blames Network Rail—a body that he is responsible for—and continues to duff his own culpability in the timetable fiasco. And then, in this statement, he talks about the absence of clear lines of accountability; I think we know who has responsibility.

With regards to terms of reference, we need to look at the value for money of the subsidy in the current system—£2.3 billion in 2016-17—as well as the value of public sector bids, and how foreign state-owned companies can come to the UK and make money to reinvest in their own national railways. We also need to look at the devolution to Scotland, especially as Network Rail is too large as it is; the performance of the Department for Transport, especially with regards to the tendering process and the mismanagement of the east coast main line tender; the performance of direct awards and the cost to the taxpayer; and the HS2 and Crossrail delays.

Will the Secretary of State stand up and rule out the privatisation of Network Rail? He seems to keep saying that the nationalisation of Network Rail is the problem. We do not want a repeat of the Tory Railtrack failure by privatising the state infrastructure. Will he rule out privatisation today?

Chris Grayling: The hon. Gentleman continues to argue for the devolution of Network Rail, even though it was not recommended in the report on the powers that should be given to the Scottish Government. I will continue to say to that Scottish Government that when they actually run the rest of their responsibilities well, they will have a better case for arguing for additional responsibilities.

The review will look comprehensively at the structure of the industry. It is designed to deliver genuine change. I do not expect the industry to emerge from this review in the same shape that it is in today. It is important that we find a structure that works for the public and passengers, but I do not intend to transfer the ownership of Network Rail to the private sector.

Martin Vickers (Cleethorpes) (Con): I welcome the statement. At the moment, there is much competition to gain a franchise, but very little competition once the franchise has been granted. Will the review take account of that and introduce more competition into the actual provision of services?

Chris Grayling: My hon. Friend makes an important point. Competition needs to be a part of the way in which our railway works because it drives better performance for customers. Indeed, the presence of open access operators on the east coast main line has undoubtedly created a better competitive environment for passengers. Whatever structure emerges from the review, there must be a place for open access and competition. There are parts of the network where competition is impossible—it is very difficult to deliver on a single commuter network—but we should always aspire to have a competitive pressure on the industry in a network between major population centres.

Nick Smith (Blaenau Gwent) (Lab): Will this review consider whether Transport for Wales is given further powers to hold Network Rail to account for delivering improvements to railway infrastructure there? There must be clearer accountability to improve Wales’s railways.

Chris Grayling: Of course, I have proceeded with probably the most substantial piece of devolution of infrastructure in Wales since privatisation, by handing over the valley lines to the Welsh Government to turn...
into the Cardiff metro. There is a strong case for such an approach. I have also indicated to those leading Merseyrail that I am very happy to transfer their infrastructure to them. As part of the review process, we will certainly look at what the right approach to the issue of devolution might be.

Vicky Ford (Chelmsford) (Con): Like the Secretary of State, I regularly commute into this place and would like to see an improvement to the rail service that my constituents get, but many of the delays are due to Network Rail, not to Greater Anglia. In my view, the best way to hold the operators to account is to hit them in the pockets and ensure that people get fair compensation when trains are delayed. May I therefore encourage the Secretary of State to continue the work that he is doing to ensure that repayment mechanisms are as effective as possible across the country?

Chris Grayling: I absolutely agree with my hon. Friend. We are now moving ahead with automated Delay Repay and the rolling out of 15-minute Delay Repay, which I know is a matter close to her heart; I hope and expect to bring that to her network in 2019.

Mr Barry Sheerman (Huddersfield) (Lab/Co-op): The Secretary of State knows that there will be disappointment with his statement. It is not far-reaching enough and it is insensitive to launch something like this, which has aspirations really to change the rail sector, when he knows that the rail sector is a community of very dedicated people—staff and travellers. We all know that community very well, but he started off by rubbishing one part of it. That is not the way to build the community. Everybody in that sector—I admit that it is a strange sector—knows the confusion that came out of the botched privatisation by the John Major Government, because there are three partners that do not seem to come together. Those three partners will never come together unless we have leadership from the Secretary of State; that is woefully lacking today.

Chris Grayling: In all the conversations that I have had with people across the rail industry, I have met very few who disagree with my analysis about the need to bring back together the operation of the track and the train. What comes out of this review has to deliver a bring back together the operation of the track and the few who disagree with my analysis about the need to strike, as I have seen in the Southern network. Strikes will only occur if the unions and the workforce embrace capacity without the need to build more track, but that technology? The digital railway will add a third extra the great future improvements that can be made from With that in mind, may I ask him to take into account the Secretary of State’s approach. In all the conversations that I have had with people across the rail industry, I have met very few who disagree with my analysis about the need to bring back together the operation of the track and the train. What comes out of this review has to deliver a bring back together the operation of the track and the few who disagree with my analysis about the need to strike, as I have seen in the Southern network. Strikes will only occur if the unions and the workforce embrace capacity without the need to build more track, but that technology? The digital railway will add a third extra the great future improvements that can be made from with longer trains, new trains and more space right across the network, funded by the train operating companies and the lease companies.

Vicky Ford: The hon. Gentleman talks about safety. This is a false approach. We know that the chief inspector of safety on our railways has said that the approach that is now taken on many parts of the network is safe. On Southern, where we had the initial problems, more staff are operating on trains now than before the dispute. So this is not about taking staff away from helping passengers; it is about making the railways run more efficiently. It is tragic that the Labour party does not seem to want that and all Labour Members can do is chime the same songs as their union paymasters.

Jessica Morden (Newport East) (Lab): As part of the rail review, will the Secretary of State look at cross-border rail services between Wales and England? They are overcrowded and unreliable now. There needs to be far better working with the Welsh Government on this, because demand in my constituency just grows and grows.

Chris Grayling: I absolutely accept that. The hon. Lady highlights one of the problems across the network. The new trains on the Great Western franchise that are coming as part of the Wales & Borders franchise will help. I am also focused with the CrossCountry franchise on making sure that, as we take this forward in the interim period we do not lose sight of the need to expand capacity. She makes a good point, but what she is experiencing is true across the whole network. It is why we have this big programme of train replacement, with longer trains, new trains and more space right across the network, funded by the train operating companies and the lease companies.

Mr Marcus Jones (Nuneaton) (Con): I welcome my right hon. Friend’s statement. Many of my constituents commute from Nuneaton to Birmingham or Leicester. That service has become so popular that there is a massive demand for new capacity. I hear what my right hon. Friend says about the CrossCountry franchise, and I will be grateful if he says today what that means in relation to the improvement in capacity that is so desperately needed for my constituents.

Chris Grayling: We are now looking at what we do with the CrossCountry franchise over the coming years, but I assure him that one part of that planning is dealing with overcrowding on the routes. There are too many parts of the CrossCountry network where the trains are just too full, and we have to address that, and we will.

Stephen Lloyd (Eastbourne) (LD): I appreciate the Secretary of State’s statement. I welcome a review of the railways, but if the Government are admitting that the railways are not working, they should freeze fares until the review reports and the changes are made. This certainly means cancelling the planned rises in January, particularly as my constituents who travel on Southern Rail and passengers across the country have had such a torrid time. Does the Secretary of State agree?

Chris Grayling: In those areas where people have had a torrid time we have provided a month’s free travel. We did that on Southern during the worst days of the industrial dispute, because that delivers quicker and much more substantially money into the pocket of...
people who have suffered. That has been a good approach. It amounts, together with Delay Repay to almost 10% of the annual cost of travel for a season ticket holder, and it gets the money to people quicker.

Robert Courts (Witney) (Con): I warmly welcome the Secretary of State’s review and his statement today. Does he agree that it is critical that the review delivers not just vital improvements on lines such as the Cotswold line in my constituency but the improvements to reliability, stability and accountability that my rail-travelling constituents deserve?

Chris Elmore (Ogmore) (Lab): The Secretary of State will be aware that the Welsh Government have recently awarded the new Wales franchise. He mentioned devolution in his statement. If lessons are to be learned from that far better, more customer and investment focused franchise, will the Williams review draw on them so that best practice can be shared between different franchises? It is important that we learn from devolution rather than simply criticise it all the time.

Chris Grayling: I agree. The problem is that we now have a system that is fragmented but under intense capacity pressures. We need to have a railway that is more joined up, where lines of accountability are clearer and where the response to problems, which will always arise on a busy network, is much more joined up and quicker for passengers.

Chris Elmore (Ogmore) (Lab): The Secretary of State will be aware that the Welsh Government have recently awarded the new Wales franchise. He mentioned devolution in his statement. If lessons are to be learned from that far better, more customer and investment focused franchise, will the Williams review draw on them so that best practice can be shared between different franchises? It is important that we learn from devolution rather than simply criticise it all the time.

Chris Grayling: I do not criticise it all the time; I have done the biggest piece of devolution on the railways for a long time, with the creation of the Welsh Valleys line. I look forward with interest and hope that the new Welsh franchise will deliver something significantly better for passengers. Of course I am in favour of sharing best practice across the whole railway and the whole transport system.

Alec Shelbrooke (Elmet and Rothwell) (Con): My right hon. Friend will know what I am going to say because I bang on about it every time I see him, but the Access for All bridge at Garforth was promised years ago now, and all I have had is excuses and misdirection and no idea where the money given by the former Chancellor, George Osborne, has gone. As part of the review will my right hon. Friend ensure that, when promises are made they are delivered to my constituents because it is frankly an utter embarrassment?

Chris Grayling: I understand my hon. Friend’s frustration. A number of station projects did not make it in the control period that is about to end. We have funding for accessibility projects in the next control period, and I will certainly want to see those that are needed and have already been promised get prominence in the list of projects that we assemble to use that money.

Paula Sherriff (Dewsbury) (Lab): In his statement, the Secretary of State alluded to the utter chaos that we had seen in the north during the summer. Unfortunately, things have not improved measurably for my constituents. Will he take this opportunity to tell us exactly what dialogue he is having with the managing director of TransPennine Express trains? I understand that he has just received a significant pay increase, which appears as if he is being rewarded for failure.

Chris Grayling: My officials and I are in conversations with those overseeing the railways in the north all the time. Clearly, there have been improvements. TransPennine Express had issues with the timetabling of Northern, which had a knock-on effect on its services. That situation has improved. There is further to go, but the hon. Lady’s constituents will benefit from the arrival of new trains this autumn. One of the issues on TransPennine Express is capacity. More capacity will be coming on through. I am always happy to talk to her off line because I want to ensure that local problems are dealt with. She knows that she can always collar me in the Division Lobby—we are not always in the same Lobby, of course, but she is always welcome to grab me in the corridor if there are any particular issues.

Jonathan Edwards (Carmarthen East and Dinefwr) (PC): Diolch yn fawr, Madam Deputy Speaker. The Wales Governance Centre recently published figures that showed my country would have received an extra £5.6 billion since 1999 if the rate of infrastructure investment had kept pace with that of London and the south-east of England. Will the terms of reference for the review include how to ensure a more equitable share of investment so that Welsh taxpayers’ money is no longer siphoned off to invest in infrastructure here in London and the south-east?

Chris Grayling: I do not think that the Welsh can ever claim that their money is siphoned off to pay for the rest of the country, given the amount of support from taxpayers elsewhere in the UK that goes into Wales, but we will be looking at all aspects of the industry, how we operate different parts of the infrastructure and ensuring that we do the right things for the whole of the UK.

Alex Sobel (Leeds North West) (Lab/Co-op): My constituents who use the Wharfedale and Harrogate Northern rail lines are still experiencing missed and late services and are still travelling on Pacers trains. I have met Northern a number of times. They have promised the new trains by December and no more Pacers by March, and that these problems will be alleviated. How will the new terms of reference ensure that those demands are met?

Chris Grayling: I was in Harrogate recently, talking to passengers at the station, and I know that the new trains have started to arrive on the line from Leeds north through Harrogate. I understand from my hon. Friend the Member for Harrogate and Knaresborough (Andrew Jones) that he has had a number of letters from constituents praising the new trains and saying that it is a great new departure for the local railway. Of course it takes time for a new fleet of trains to arrive. The Pacers trains will be going, the sooner the better from my point of view, but the good news for people using that line is that they are one of the first in the north to get the new trains.

Jeff Smith (Manchester, Withington) (Lab): If this is going to be a truly comprehensive review, will the Secretary of State look again at the ownership of stations,
especially those in Greater Manchester, where Transport for Greater Manchester made a strong case for better integrated services if it were able to take over ownership of the stations?

Chris Grayling: We will look at all aspects of devolution. The issue was that Transport for Greater Manchester wanted us to give the money for it to do the stations up, and then effectively we would pay it back out of rail revenues that would flow back through the franchise to the Government, as part of the subsidy we provide. It was not a compelling deal. Instead, I offered both money and the expertise of London and Continental Railways—the development arm of the Department for Transport—to help it maximise the potential of those stations, and that work is happening at the moment.

Point of Order

12.59 pm

Valerie Vaz (Walsall South) (Lab): On a point of order, Madam Deputy Speaker. This week, the UK Statistics Authority strongly rebuked the Department for Education for its use of statistics, including the now thoroughly discredited claim that its policies have led to 1.9 million more children being in good or outstanding schools. The Government were clearly advised to stop using that claim but, incredibly, the Prime Minister went on to reuse it at Prime Minister’s questions—ironically, when being challenged by my right hon. Friend the Leader of the Opposition on the Government’s misuse of statistics. Earlier today I challenged the Leader of the House, and she went on to repeat the same misleading statistic herself.

When my hon. Friend the Member for Batley and Spen (Tracy Brabin) raised this with Mr Speaker on Wednesday, he said that it is not his role to act as a truth commissioner, and neither is it yours, Madam Deputy Speaker. The UK Statistics Authority has already ruled on the truth of those statistics, so clearly I am not asking you to do that. However, I seek your guidance on the procedure when Ministers have inadvertently misled the House. Can you confirm that in such a case, it is incumbent on the Minister to correct the record? Can you tell us whether any Ministers have given you an indication of when they intend to do so?

Madam Deputy Speaker (Dame Eleanor Laing): I thank the hon. Lady for her point of order, and I appreciate fully the point she makes. I am glad that I do not have to argue the point that it is not for the Chair to decide on the veracity or otherwise of any statistic used in the Chamber. That is a blessing, because if it were the duty of the Chair, the Chair would have no time to do anything else. I also appreciate that the purpose of the hon. Lady’s point of order is to draw to the attention of those in the Chamber and on the Treasury Bench the factual problem that she alleges, and I have every confidence that they have noted her points, which I hope means that she has achieved her objective.
Victims Strategy

1.2 pm

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Justice (Edward Argar): I beg to move,

That this House has considered the Victims Strategy.

It is a pleasure to open today’s debate on the victims strategy, which is of importance to Members on both sides of the House and to our constituents. Today’s debate follows on from the launch of the first ever cross-Government victims strategy by my right hon. Friend the Secretary of State for Justice and myself on 10 September. The strategy has been well received, and I want to take this opportunity to thank my officials; partners in the Crown Prosecution Service and the police, and especially police and crime commissioner Vera Baird; members of the victims’ panel; Government colleagues, particularly the Under-Secretary of State for the Home Department, my hon. Friend the Member for Louth and Horncastle (Victoria Atkins), as well as my predecessor, my hon. Friend the Member for Bracknell (Dr Lee), and my hon. and learned Friend the Solicitor General; groups who support victims; and particularly victims themselves, who have bravely shared their experiences and made a huge contribution to this strategy.

In that vein, I also want to thank the shadow Minister, the hon. Member for Ashfield (Gloria De Piero), for her constructive engagement. While we may differ on some details, and rightly in her role she may—and, I sense, will—challenge me on particular aspects, her sincere commitment to improve support for the victims of crime is evident and consistent.

The strategy reflects this Government’s and this Prime Minister’s clear commitment to better support the victims of crime, building on progress so far. Someone who is a victim of crime should not become a victim of the process that follows. Our legal and justice system is quite rightly admired around the world, but we must ensure that it continues to evolve, to reflect the evolving nature of crime and the needs of victims. Our vision is of a justice system that supports more victims to speak up with the certainty that they will be understood, protected and, above all else, supported, regardless of their circumstances or background.

I make no apology for the lengthy list of those whom I thanked and paid tribute to a few moments ago for their work in this area, because that list—I could have included many others—reflects the fact that the key to delivering our vision and what victims want and need lies in working together.

Michael Tomlinson (Mid Dorset and North Poole) (Con): The Minister is sensibly outlining the fact that this is a cross-departmental and, to a certain extent, cross-party issue. Will he also acknowledge the importance of rehabilitation of offenders and encourage his Department to ramp up its work in that regard? If there is greater rehabilitation, there will be fewer victims in the first place and fewer offenders reoffending.

Edward Argar: My hon. Friend is absolutely right. I know that he has taken a consistent interest in that issue both as a Member and in his distinguished legal career prior to being elected to this place. He is right that this strategy is about providing support for the victims of crime, but ideally we must continue to focus on reducing the number of victims. This Government are very clear in the measures they are taking to reduce the number of victims of crime through tackling crime, but equally, as I say, rehabilitation is vital, because if we can prevent people from reoffending, we will see fewer victims of crime in the first place.

No single Department, agency, emergency service or other organisation alone can provide the services that victims rightly expect to receive, as shown by the response to major incidents and tragedies, such as the Grenfell fire and terrorist attacks in Manchester and London. Since my appointment four months ago, I have spoken to many victims and survivors, victims’ groups and of course the excellent Victims’ Commissioner, Baroness Newlove. I pay tribute to Baroness Newlove, who has played a huge role in moving this agenda forward since her appointment. She has taken a new role, shaped it, made it her own and achieved a huge amount, and we should all be grateful to her.

I also highlight the role of Members. It is difficult to single out particular ones, but I pay tribute to the work of my right hon. Friend the Member for Hemel Hempstead (Sir Mike Penning), who held this role before me many years ago and started off a lot of this work. He is a tireless, vocal and fearless campaigner on these issues, and that should be recognised. I also recognise the work of those who work in the justice system.

Through visits I have undertaken to not just our custodial establishments but women’s centres in the north-west, the Hackney youth offending team and youth courts, I have heard directly exactly how important the victim's experience is to ensure that justice is delivered and is seen and felt to be delivered. This strategy consolidates years of progress that have been made by Governments of both parties, from the introduction of the first code of practice for victims in 2006, to the appointment of the first Victims’ Commissioner in 2010 and the 2012 publication of “Getting it right for victims and witnesses”. There is a large amount of cross-party consensus on this agenda. That is to the good, and we might wish to see it more often in this House.

Crucially, we are seeking to ensure that we keep pace with the changing nature of crime and the crimes being reported and are better able to deal with the pressures placed on the system. Our criminal justice system must ensure that those who are innocent are acquitted and that those who are guilty are convicted, but it must also work to respect the interests of victims. Victims have told us that they want to be treated fairly, properly and with dignity. They want to have timely, accurate information and communication and to see a joined-up and effective system working for them and ensuring that their journey is as simple as possible. Members will see that the structure of the strategy is no coincidence. I was clear that its structure should reflect the journey of a victim through the criminal justice system, making it clear that we are seeking to place them at the heart of what we are trying to do with this strategy.

We have made significant progress, but recognise that more must and can be done. Through the strategy, we seek to make victims’ entitlements a practical reality, rather than simply well intentioned words on a page. To that end, we have committed to strengthening the code of practice for victims—the victims code—to make sure that it keeps pace with the changing needs of victims and the nature of crime in the 21st century, while...
making clear to agencies and victims the services they are expected to provide and receive. We will deliver on that commitment by updating and amending the victims code to address its complexity, accessibility and language, and updating the entitlements. We shall consult on the changes in early 2019.

We want to go further, so in our strategy we reaffirm our manifesto commitment to develop proposals and to consult on the detail of a victims law. We will consider strengthening the enforcement of the victims code to ensure that victims receive the services to which they are entitled and, if they do not, better to hold criminal justice agencies to account; strengthening the powers of the Victims, Commissioner, so that that role has a stronger voice for victims and is better able to hold Government to account; and strengthening the role such legislation can play to underpin the consistency and enforceability of standards and the code. I pay tribute to Baroness Brinton, who is already engaged in that work, and to the right hon. and learned Member for Holborn and St Pancras (Keir Starmer) for his work both in his previous role and in this House. We may not always agree on all the details of his proposals, but I look forward with pleasure to continuing to engage with him, as we develop the legislative proposals in the coming months.

In considering the changing nature of crime and victims’ needs, it is right that we address compensation. Although no amount of money can make up for the immense suffering endured by victims of violent crime, it is vital that they receive the help and support they need to rebuild their lives. In the victims strategy, we announced our intention to undertake a full review of the criminal injuries compensation scheme to ensure that it reflects fully the changing nature of crime and that every victim gets the compensation to which they are entitled.

James Cleverly (Braintree) (Con): Will my hon. Friend agree that it is pacey and timely? Often, the issue is when the compensation comes through, not just how much it is.

Edward Argar: My hon. Friend is right. In many aspects of the treatment of victims by the system, timeliness is hugely important. Although the operation of the scheme is a matter for the Criminal Injuries Compensation Authority, his points about timeliness and pace are well made and noted.

It is important that the review looks not only at the concerns regarding the eligibility rules of the scheme, but at its sustainability, the affordability of any changes to be made and the rules on the timescales for applications. It will also enable the Government to take account of recommendations made by the independent inquiry into child sexual abuse, which is investigating compensation and redress for victims of child sexual abuse. The review is expected to report in 2019 with recommendations for reform.

We have also announced our intention to remove the pre-1979 “same roof rule” from the scheme. We recognise that the rule has unfairly denied compensation for some victims of violence and abuse, who lived with their attacker as members of the same family, and we are committed to abolishing it as quickly as possible. I look forward to introducing proposals in the coming months. I take this opportunity to pay specific tribute to the hon. Member for Rotherham (Sarah Champion). Not only is she an honourable and diligent Member, but she is a brave and dedicated campaigner and a very decent lady. She has cause to be very proud of her work on this issue, as do her constituents.

Alongside the victims strategy and reflecting commitments in it, we have also launched a consultation on establishing an independent public advocate to support those who have been bereaved in public disasters through subsequent inquests and inquiries. Losing a loved one in any circumstances is always deeply distressing, but those who have been bereaved in a public disaster have the additional challenge of navigating the complex and often lengthy investigations into what happened, alongside many other families all struggling to get access to information and to make their voices heard. During this time, as happened to the families bereaved in the Hillsborough stadium disaster, the voices of the bereaved can be lost to the very people responsible for uncovering the truth. We are committed to ensuring that the experiences of the Hillsborough families are not repeated and that the concerns and views of the bereaved are heard. It is the right thing to do.

The independent public advocate will help bereaved families to engage effectively with investigations. They will ensure that bereaved families understand what is happening and why; that they can participate in these investigations, when there is the opportunity to do so; and that those undertaking the investigations understand the views of the bereaved and are able to answer any questions they have. The independent public advocate will help to ensure that the voices of the bereaved are heard. Our consultation, which runs until 3 December, explores the role of the independent public advocate in greater detail, seeking views on when the support will be available, what investigations the role will cover and who will be eligible for support. I wholeheartedly encourage Members to contribute their views to that consultation.

We recognise that support can be fragmented and difficult to navigate and that victims often do not know what is available or where to find help. For many, the experience of being a victim does not stop after a crime has been committed. We are committed to ensuring that victims receive quality support when and where they need it. We are working across Government to develop seamless support for all victims of crime through better agency co-operation and more devolution to police and crime commissioners. In that context, I am particularly pleased with the work being led by Assistant Chief Constable Emma Barnett, who is pulling together cross-agency working groups to make sure that that work is driven forward at pace across all agencies.

In the past, the shadow Minister, the hon. Member for Ashfield, has rightly raised questions about funding. The strategy is for all victims and outlines additional funding of approximately £37 million that is provided for those who report crime and those who, for whatever reason, do not or cannot. It also sets out our plans to bring Government and agency spending on supporting victims—roughly £200 million a year—together for the first time, to improve co-ordination. To do this, we will develop a new delivery model for support services, which will allow us better to co-ordinate and combine funding, in order to increase its impact. There are new services and additional funding, but we also plan to
make existing money work better, with our focus less on inputs than on outputs for victims, so that we can improve support and ensure that the money goes to the right people, in the right place at the right time.

As part of the additional funding, we have committed to increasing spending from £31 million to £39 million on improving services for survivors of sexual violence and abuse who seek support from sexual assault centres. We will bring in new funding for advocacy for those affected by domestic homicide, and we are improving the support for families bereaved by murder and manslaughter by replacing current funding arrangements, allowing them access to the widest range of support, based on their needs. We have further committed to improving support for victims of sexual violence. From April 2019, we will award grant funding to rape support services for two years, rather than for one as we do now, offering more stability and certainty to those essential support providers. We will also explore the benefits of full local commissioning of sexual violence support services with police and crime commissioners, who we believe have a key role in responding to the needs of victims in their local area.

We are spending £8 million on interventions to make sure that the right support is available for children who witness domestic abuse. For some children, that trauma can lead to internalisation and normalisation of abuse, and perhaps to repetition. We must do all we can to break the cycle and to end this abhorrent crime.

We will ensure a criminal justice system in which perpetrators are brought to justice, and that intervenes to protect victims before abuse escalates.

We are acutely aware of the importance of listening to and understanding victims’ experiences of domestic abuse, and that is why the Government recently held a consultation on transforming our response to such experiences. We will publish our response later this year, and introduce legislation through the domestic abuse Bill. I am pleased to see sitting beside me the Under-Secretary of State for the Home Department my hon. Friend the Member for Louth and Horncastle. She is my opposite number in the Home Office and is doing amazing work driving forward this agenda. I work closely with her on this issue, along with the Solicitor General.

Victims need support and information so that they remain confident and engaged, and so that they have the tools they need fully to understand and challenge decisions in the justice system. We will improve support after a crime has been reported by introducing better police training on conducting interviews and collecting evidence, and we will trial body-worn cameras to assist in taking victims’ personal statements. That will give greater choice in how victims are heard and reduce the need for statements to be repeated multiple times to multiple people, which involves the added trauma of having to relive the experience once again.

We are committed to increasing the number of intermediaries by a quarter, so that there are more experts to assist victims and witnesses in communicating evidence to the police and courts. Furthermore, we will improve communication with victims by clearly explaining decisions not to prosecute, and the right for them to review Crown Prosecution Service decisions. We reiterate our clear support for the unduly lenient sentence scheme, which is led by my hon. and learned Friend the Solicitor General.

We fully recognise that for some, going to court can be daunting and criminal trials can be complex. We want to minimise the impact on victims of attending court by improving the support available, and responding to their practical needs. We will deliver that by launching new guidance and a toolkit for prosecutors and therapists, to encourage the take-up of pre-trial therapy. We will improve the court environment with new victim-friendly waiting areas, and continue to develop the use of video links that allow vulnerable victims to give evidence away from the defendant and courtroom.

Sarah Champion (Rotherham) (Lab): I know the Government have been trying to roll out video links for a while, but one kickback comes because courts do not have the funds to get the equipment. Will the Minister address that?

Edward Argar: We are developing the video link scheme, and one key factor of its development is to ensure that the technology is robust and does the job. That is why we are taking our time to ensure that we get this right and that prosecutors, defendants and judges have confidence in that technology. The scheme will be rolled out to more courts in fairly short order, but the real factor behind the time we are taking is to ensure that we get it right and that trials continue to be robust.

We will expand support for families who have been bereaved by gang violence. The recent spate of gang-related violence, especially in London, has shone a light on the devastation that knife and gun crime can reap on families and communities. Alongside the strong lead taken by the Home Secretary in bringing forward measures to tackle the issue at source, we will introduce new funding for those affected by homicide.

Huw Merriman (Bexhill and Battle) (Con): I congratulate my hon. Friend on the work he is doing on behalf of victims, but may I take him back to the court process? For many victims, the act of sentencing gives them justice, yet in far too many cases the feeling is that the defendant has the upper hand due to the menace that they can display during sentencing or their ability not to attend sentencing and stay in the cells. Has the Minister undertaken any work to find out how such things can be minimised so that defendants do not behave in such a manner?

Edward Argar: My hon. Friend is right, and at all stages of the process it is important to minimise additional distress to victims. I understand that judges, quite rightly, control and manage their own court rooms, and they have the power—if they believe it appropriate—to proceed without the defendant being present. That is a matter of judicial discretion, and I have confidence that our world-class judiciary will exercise that discretion appropriately.

Finally, I turn to parole. Earlier this year the Worboys case brought into focus the need for improvements to be made to the way that victims are communicated with and their cases handled. We want to ensure that the system is as transparent as possible, and that victims
have a voice in the process. That is why this strategy sets out our plans to reform and simplify the victim contact scheme, to make it easier for victims to opt-in, and to introduce more frequent and better quality communication. We will also improve victim liaison officer training, especially in supporting victims during parole hearings and with the presumption that a victim’s personal statement can be made to the Parole Board if the victim wishes it.

In April the Secretary of State published the “Review of the law, policy and procedure relating to Parole Board decisions.” We have further consulted on the detail for parole decisions to be reconsidered in certain circumstances, and are carefully considering all responses to that review before setting out our next steps later this year. Those steps can, and should, help to ensure that past failings cannot be repeated.

I believe that this strategy is a reflection of how we should seek to see ourselves: as a nation that offers dignity, empathy and compassion to people when they are at their most vulnerable. There is a broad consensus on that across the House, and alongside the vigorous action taken by this Government to reduce crime and the number of victims of crime, this strategy will help to ensure that when someone becomes a victim of crime, the support they need is there. We have already begun to implement that strategy, and I look forward to its delivering on this Government’s, and my personal, commitment to the victims of crime.

1.26 pm

Gloria De Piero (Ashfield) (Lab): I thank the Minister for his kind words, his tone, and the commitment to victims that he demonstrated in his speech. There is, of course, much to welcome, and although I know he is relatively new to this role, I will raise once again the deep frustration that I feel, because it is years since the Government first promised that they would enshrine key entitlements for victims and witnesses in primary legislation. These measures are welcome, but it seems a little late to be still saying “consultation, consultation, consultation.” I suppose victims will have to wait a little longer for their rights to be taken seriously, and for some of the positive measures mentioned to be guaranteed by law.

Rights in the current victims code are not sufficiently enforceable, and without the power to enforce that code in law, it is left to the police, prosecutors, courts and the Parole Board to monitor how well they comply and to mark their own homework. Well-meaning but underfunded service providers are creaking under the weight of Government cuts, and unscrupulous practitioners are still able to leave victims without their rights or any come back.

As I have been saying for months, the only thing that will do is legislation. The Victims’ Commissioner, whom the Minister rightly praises, has called for a victims law, and for seismic change in the culture of the justice system. Victim Support has demanded legislation, along with a raft of other campaigners. The Government now say that they will consult on a revised victims code in 2019—nearly half a decade after they first promised to provide a victims law—and on the detail of victim-focused legislation. Can the Minister say that what part of victims’ rights would not require legal status? Why not make the entire code law, along with any welcome and necessary additions?

I was dismayed, although not entirely surprised that, after I submitted various written questions—I think this was before the Minister’s tenure—I discovered that the Government do not collect data on the experiences of victims in the criminal justice system, or on how the code is being implemented. They could not tell me how many breaches of the victims code there have been in the past 12 years, how long it takes for victims to receive any compensation they have been awarded, or how many victims of domestic violence have been cross-examined in court by the perpetrator—the list goes on. The Government simply do not monitor whether the code, which they admit is known about by only a fraction of victims, is having any effect. Will the Government commit to act by looking at how this is or is not working, now and after any legislation is passed? Can the Minister tell me the answer to any of those questions today? Will his Department commit to annual reporting on the state of victims’ rights?

It is also disappointing that some fundamental issues that victims and campaigners have been shouting about from the rooftops are not addressed in the strategy. Why are there no measures to stop the barbaric process of allowing victims of rape to be cross-examined in a way that is designed to undermine their credibility? We have seen instances of rape survivors being grilled by their previous partners about their underwear and even about owning sex toys in an attempt to undermine their credibility and to show that their sexual history meant they were surely consenting to their rapist.

Meticulous research from Dame Vera Baird QC, the former Solicitor General, and the Northumbria police and crime commissioner, to whom the Minister referred found that rape complainants’ previous sexual history was used as evidence in 37% of the trials she studied. In the majority of those cases, the evidence used related to the women’s sexual activity with men other than the defendant. In almost two thirds of the cases where previous sexual history was used in evidence, the proper procedure to apply for the judge’s consent ahead of trial with notice to the prosecution was not followed. There was either no application or it was made at trial without notice. In one trial, the defence barrister said that his line of questioning was to show that “she is an adulteress”. Surely the Government can see that that is outrageous and that we are living in 2018—especially after so much progress has been made by the Me Too movement.

Sarah Champion: I am sure that my hon. Friend is aware and deeply shocked that in cases of child sexual exploitation, children are disproportionately asked about their past sexual behaviour, which then goes out in front of the court. Surely that must be stopped.

Gloria De Piero: My hon. Friend is absolutely right, and let me take this opportunity to commend her for her rigorous and unstoppable campaigning work. That is a very good point, which, if we are having a consultation, should be included in it.

The Victims’ Commissioner for London rightly said that this process re-traumatises victims. It causes them irreparable harm and prevents other victims from coming forward, yet we see nothing about that in the strategy.

Stephanie Peacock (Barnsley East) (Lab): My hon. Friend is making a very powerful point. Half of all clinical commissioning groups have plans to reduce their spending
on mental health. Does she agree that this will have a significant impact on survivors of sexual assault and domestic violence, for whom mental health services are so important in helping them to recover from trauma?

Gloria De Piero: I thank my hon. Friend for making that point. Yesterday was World Mental Health Day. For anyone—there may be people in this House who have suffered the trauma we are discussing—to have to go through that trauma without the mental health support one would inevitably need is shocking.

A victims law presents a unique opportunity to protect rape victims from the ordeal of having their sexual history dragged through the courts. Does the Minister deny there is a problem, or will he, at the very least, commit to including this issue in the forthcoming consultation?

My hon. Friend the Member for Barnsley East (Stephanie Peacock) mentioned mental health. The strategy makes little mention of the mental health trauma most victims experience after their ordeal and the long-lasting effects it has on their lives. One third of forensic physicians who support victims after a sexual assault say accessibility to mental health provision is poor, so they cannot always refer victims to the help they desperately need. The Victims’ Commissioner for London talks about rape and sexual violence victims who have been left unsupported on waiting lists for six months or more after unimaginable trauma. The Government need to guarantee victims’ decent mental health provision by law and fund it adequately, not as a Cinderella service. Can the Minister give me some reassurance on that today?

The Conservative party claims that austerity is over. Can the Minister confirm that a number of spending pledges in the victims strategy, on which I have sought clarification through written questions, such as the £18.8 million for domestic abuse accommodation services and £8 million to support children who witness domestic abuse, are not in fact additional funding commitments but money shifted from elsewhere in existing budgets? Will he tell us which other areas and services will lose out as a result?

What about the personal finances of victims? I recently had a harrowing conversation with a woman whose husband was given a 16-year sentence for her attempted murder. She is now having to pay enormous legal fees to divorce him, knowing that he is likely to be entitled to some of her money, her pension and her home. Where is the justice in that? When two women a month are murdered by a partner, this is no small problem. This absurd situation cannot be allowed to continue. The presumption must be that there is a loss of financial entitlement, enforced by law, in all but the most exceptional cases of murder or attempted murder of a spouse. Will the Minister commit to legislation that strips attempted murderers of their spousal rights, which they surely forfeited when inflicting such brutal damage on their partner? I hope Government Ministers will work with us to amend the law and ensure that this obvious injustice is ended.

Other victims who feel that perpetrators have got off far too lightly include the families of people killed on our roads. In 2014, 25-year-old Joseph Brown-Lartey was tragically killed in Rochdale by a reckless motorist driving at 80 miles per hour in a 30 miles per hour speed limit zone. The offender was sentenced to six years in jail and was released after just three. The family of this young person with so much to live for are rightly furious that this driver can walk free while they are left to grieve. It is almost a year to the day since the Government committed to increasing the maximum sentence for causing death by dangerous driving, yet the families of those killed are still waiting for changes. Will the Government tell us when we can expect those increases to come forward?

There is no Government commitment to introducing an independent violence advocate to support victims as they recover and seek justice. Victims should not have to navigate an extremely complex system alone. Will the Minister agree with me and the Victims’ Commissioner for London, and commit to that in the new strategy?

As the Victims’ Commissioner, Baroness Newlove, has said, victims should not have to fight their own corner. This strategy, although it does contain positive measures, leaves far too much to be desired for victims, who will still feel on their own under this Government. It is time for real action by passing a proper victims law.
I certainly welcome the enormous progress that has been made, particularly over the past 12 years, starting with the introduction of the victims' code. It is right that we pay tribute to the work done by previous Governments to introduce the Victims’ Commissioner, who has done some extremely important work to ensure that victims’ interests are considered within Government and more widely. More recently, police and crime commissioners up and down the country have put the rights and interests of victims at the heart of their work, ensuring that they are a priority in local policing. The best PCCs ensure that is a key part of their focus, beyond what most people probably associate with their core work.

Bob Stewart (Beckenham) (Con): I am listening carefully to my hon. Friend, but I am also concerned that the number of victims applying to civil courts to try to get non-molestation orders against abusive partners or ex-partners seems to be on the increase. I hope that we will be taking action to try to stop that, because sometimes it costs people up to £10,000 to get an ex-partner off their back.

Mike Wood: I am sure that the Minister will respond to my hon. Friend’s point, which I agree with. Of course, some of the legislation going through the House is relevant to that point, whether the legislation relating to the Government’s domestic violence strategy or private Members’ Bills, such as the Stalking Protection Bill promoted by my hon. Friend the Member for Totnes (Dr Wollaston). They will allow the criminal justice system to ensure that perpetrators are stopped before their crimes, which are directed largely at women but also at men, escalate to something more serious.

Although much progress has been made in recent years—and we all recognise that the £200 million being spent on supporting victims is a considerable amount of money—I am sure that we all have examples from our constituencies of victims being let down by the system. One of the most upsetting cases that I have dealt with recently involved a young woman in my constituency. The charges for the crimes that she was the victim of covered a range of serious offences, including sexual offences and false imprisonment. Her statement included evidence of very coercive behaviour, domestic violence and assault. Yet her experience of our criminal justice system was simply not good enough.

After an arrest was made, the communication from the police was certainly not good enough, but it got worse as the cases progressed. At the initial bail hearing there was little or no communication from the police or the Crown Prosecution Service. The family understand that the CPS did not contest the bail hearing, despite the very serious offences involved, but they still do not understand how or why that decision was made. The suspect was released on bail and continued to live in the local area. Although bail conditions were of course imposed, the police offered no reassurances on how the victim could be protected pending trial.

The accused was re-arrested after an incident and an application was made to vary the bail conditions, but that hearing was missed because, as far as we can ascertain, they were taken to the wrong court on the day of the hearing after a weekend in a police cell. Having missed the hearing, the accused was re-released on the existing bail conditions. We can only imagine how that affected the victim and her family. It is simply not good enough.

Perhaps more worryingly, the victim and her family have constantly been told that it would be better if she did not have any counselling, therapy or help to deal with these traumatic experiences until the trial concluded, in case it influenced the evidence. A victim may have to wait 15 or 18 months before the case comes to trial, and all that time without proper support is extremely damaging. Even with the best psychiatric support, therapy and counselling, and any other services that the state, the third sector or anyone else can offer, it is difficult to see how that damage could be repaired at a later stage.

Sarah Champion: I am grateful to the hon. Gentleman for making that point about the suggestion that victims should not have counselling before going to court. I have heard about that a lot recently, from both the police and the CPS. Is that something the Minister could look into, because there are appropriate types of counselling that would not disrupt people’s recollection, and they are being denied that support?

Mike Wood: I hope that can be considered. Clearly nobody wants to endanger a fair trial, or to give another reason to cast doubt on credible evidence. The circumstances of a lot of domestic violence and serious sexual offences mean that the evidence available is often not as concrete as it might be for other types of crime. We really do need to ensure that victims receive both the service they deserve and the support they so desperately need. This strategy is an important first step in making sure that is the case. I have referred to only one example from my constituency, although it is a particularly distressing one, but I am sure that there are very few Members, if any, who have not encountered something similar in their own constituency casework.

I welcome the strategy that the Minister introduced today, and particularly the plans for a victims Bill. It is so important that we look to place on a statutory footing the strengthening of those rights already provided in the code and of the powers that the Victims’ Commissioner has to ensure that victims’ rights are protected within Government and outside, to ensure that victims and their families have access to information—the right to be informed—and the right to be properly involved. Clearly, this does need to be done on a cross-Government basis, as it does not all fall within a single Department.

The crime survey of England and Wales suggests that one fifth of adults will be the victims of crime this year in some form. The strategy is an important step in making sure that those victims who have already suffered from crime are not made to suffer again through the process that follows that crime.

1.51 pm

Gavin Newlands (Paisley and Renfrewshire North) (SNP): It is a pleasure to follow the hon. Member for Dudley South (Mike Wood), and I, too, am pleased that we are discussing this extremely important issue today. I welcome the degree of consensus forming around placing victims at the heart of justice, although it is to be regretted that it has taken so long for the Government to publish this strategy. I also welcome the Government’s
approach in looking to that great beacon of good governance in Edinburgh, as confirmed last month by the Minister, who said that “in drawing up this strategy we have taken great heed of what is done in Scotland and looked at what the Scottish Government do. There is no reason to be dogmatic about these things. Where there is good practice elsewhere that may be applicable, we are always happy to look at it, and my officials have been looking at what is done in Scotland.”—[Official Report, 10 September 2018; Vol. 646, c. 482.]

He was right to do so—Scottish legislation has already created strong rights and protections for victims that cover many of the issues now in the Government’s victims strategy. For example, the Victims and Witnesses (Scotland) Act 2014 has improved the support and information that is available to victims, and I point to the Scottish Government’s victims code for Scotland, published in 2016, which clearly sets out the rights of victims in one place. The code ensures that justice agencies, including the police, the Crown, the courts, and the Parole Board publish and report on shared standards regarding how victims are supported and how those standards are being met.

Nick Smith (Blaenau Gwent) (Lab): Gwent is a very good police force in south Wales. Nevertheless, every so often, I hear genuine concerns from victims about how their cases are being taken forward. Does the hon. Gentleman agree that better data on the experiences of victims in the justice system would be a real help?

Gavin Newlands: I could not agree more with the hon. Gentleman. The Scottish justice system, and its treatment of victims in the process, is not a land of milk and honey. It has its problems, and we could also do with better information on how victims experience the process. As a member of the Justice Committee, it is something that I will bring up. In fact, I asked a similar question at yesterday’s Committee hearing.

As I have just suggested, I am not standing here today to tell the House that the Scottish justice system or support for victims is perfect. I recently had a case in which a victim’s family felt let down by the Scottish system. My constituent had to wait five months to bury a loved one because of the time it took to find and charge a suspect. In Scotland, police often hold bodies for extended periods as both concerned families and the accused are entitled to have their own post-mortems performed, so stressful delays occur when no arrest has been made. In England and Wales, if no arrest has been made in 28 days, an independent post-mortem is commissioned. This is an area of the Scottish justice system that we need to address, and perhaps look south of the border for a solution, to make what must be an already incredibly difficult and traumatic time for those affected a little easier.

As I have said, I serve on the Justice Committee under the wise leadership of the hon. Member for Bromley and Chislehurst (Robert Neill), and we hear week in and week out of the problems right through the justice system in England and Wales, from a lack of resources to a lack of judges and courts, poor victim support, not enough lawyers in parts of the country, legal aid policy, prison overcrowding and conditions, not enough prison officers, a failing rehabilitation system— the list is seemingly endless. Week in and week out, many of the witnesses before us state that they would like the Ministry of Justice to replicate what happens in Scotland in many areas. Just yesterday, the Committee heard another extremely well qualified panel, including Professor Nick Hardwick, formerly the chair of the Parole Board and chief inspector of prisons, Dee Anand of the British Psychological Society and Mark Day of the Prison Reform Trust, all praise the approach Scotland has taken to a presumption against short sentences and on rehabilitation, which has resulted in the lowest recidivism rate in decades.

The team at the MOJ is relatively new—barring of course the Solicitor General, a welcome beacon of consistency in the Department. I welcome the fact the new team appears to be heading in a more progressive direction: whether through actually pursuing evidence-based policy or financial necessity, it is hard to say. In any case, I welcome that approach and the willingness to look at ideas from elsewhere.

As always, the SNP continually strives to build the fairest justice system possible. That is why the Scottish Government will build on our existing legislation and funding to ensure that victims are put at the centre of the justice process. Their voices will be heard and recognised. In 2018-19, the Scottish Government are providing £17.9 million to third sector organisations who work to support victims. In addition, they have announced a new three-year funding package for Victim Support Scotland, totalling £13.8 million, part of which will provide for a new homicide service giving families of murder victims access to a dedicated caseworker and continuous support. Often victims, and their families, can feel like they are being passed from one organisation to another, adding to their trauma when they are most vulnerable. This new funding is aimed at ensuring that Victim Support Scotland works in partnership with criminal justice and victim support bodies to develop a new approach. Along with the homicide service, it will ease the journey for victims and their families, whether or not they engage with the criminal justice process.

That approach has been welcomed by Victim Support Scotland, whose chief executive, Kate Wallace, said: “We’re delighted with the shift to three-year funding which provides us with greater long-term stability to enhance the front-line support we provide for people affected by crime. The creation of the Homicide Service and the victim-centred approach are also very positive new developments and we will be working closely with all our partners to make these a reality.”

Crucially, it has the support of victims’ rights campaigners themselves, including Bea Jones, founder of the Moira Fund and the mother of Moira Jones who was murdered in Queens park, Glasgow in 2008. Bea has campaigned for greater support in Scotland for families bereaved through murder, and she said: “This is an important step and one which will have a positive impact on many lives in Scotland. It will ensure more families will be helped than before, and that those families will get the right support, at the right time and from the right people. I’m pleased that in Moira’s name her charity has played a part in bringing about today’s news and that it enriches her legacy.”

I could not agree more.

The latest Scottish programme for government commits to helping victims in a number of other ways, too. It seeks to work with partners to reduce, and eliminate where possible, the need for victims to have to retell their story to different organisations as they look for
help. It seeks to widen the range of serious crimes where the victim can make a statement to court about how the crime has affected them, and it will ensure that victims and their families have better information and greater support ahead of prison release arrangements. It will also seek to improve the experience in the justice system of victims of rape and sexual assault.

Further, just four days ago, Scotland’s relatively new Justice Secretary, Humza Yousaf, announced that he would chair a new victims taskforce that will be dedicated to improving victims’ experiences of the justice system. This will ensure that victims’ voices are heard and will streamline their journey through the criminal justice system. It will also provide wide-ranging support and will ensure access to support and information through the process. The task force will hear evidence directly from victims, and membership will include senior decision makers from justice agencies and voluntary partners, including those who represent victims. This is yet more evidence of the Scottish Government leading the way in their justice policy.

Earlier, I welcomed the fact that the UK had looked for inspiration from the excellent work of the SNP Scottish Government, but we, too, look elsewhere for best practice, whether to Iceland for the Barnahus concept—which involves immediate trauma-informed multi-agency support for child victims of serious crimes and the investigation of abuse, bringing together all relevant services under one roof—or to New Zealand, with its ground-breaking domestic abuse paid leave. Just a few days ago, at its conference, the SNP passed a motion calling on the UK Government to give victims of domestic abuse the right to paid leave from work to secure safe accommodation.

As we all know, domestic abuse can have a horrific and long-lasting impact on survivors and their children and a hugely detrimental impact on their jobs and career prospects. On both sides of the border, it is vital that we do everything we can to help the victims of abuse. Across the UK, more than 100,000 people are at high risk of being murdered or seriously injured as a result of domestic abuse. We must ensure that there is an awareness of what help is available to those at risk, as, on average, those at high risk often wait more than two and a half years before getting help.

As a constituency Member and as a White Ribbon Ambassador, I recently attended an extremely useful and enlightening training session with Renfrewshire’s multi-agency risk assessment conference—MARAC—to learn about the support that it provides for victims. It works with multiple agencies to provide effective one-to-one support, advice and advocacy throughout their experience. That is an extremely difficult task in a sensitive area, but Renfrewshire MARAC is leading the way supporting victims, 95% of whom are women. It has been particularly successful, having heard 315 cases to date. In its observation audit, SafeLives Scotland found it to be the most effective MARAC in Scotland.

Renfrewshire MARAC is currently engaging in sensitive training. It has conducted 250 sensitive routine inquiry training sessions, including high-risk identification, for health visitors, family nurses, community mental health nurses, psychiatrists and psychologists and partners in addiction services. That work is essential to making the process of identifying abuse as easy as possible for the victim. It will also deliver domestic abuse awareness training to 66 housing officers, including homeless services staff, which dovetails well with the commitment made by the Scottish Government to train all front-line police officers and the domestic abuse legislation that has recently been passed in Holyrood. I encourage those who wish to promote that kind of victim support to speak to Maxine and her MARAC team to learn about and apply as much as they can.

I listened carefully to the Minister’s speech, and I echo every point that he made about domestic abuse. I look forward to the new Bill, but I urge him and his colleagues to ensure that the proper resources are provided to support its aspirations and ensure that more support is given to those who suffer such abuse.

As I think I have made clear, Scotland is leading the way in putting victims at the heart of the justice system. It is of paramount importance that victims of any crime are supported on every step of the way through the system and that the number of occasions on which they must relive their trauma is minimised as much as possible. The Scottish Government will always seek to learn from best practice across the world, and I hope that the UK Government will commit themselves to doing the same, whether from Scotland or the other side of the world. They owe it to victims and their families and friends to do just that.

2.3 pm

Paul Scully (Sutton and Cheam) (Con): Let me begin by echoing what has been said by Members, including my hon. Friend the Minister, about the hon. Member for Rotherham (Sarah Champion) and the amazing work that she has done. She is championing her constituents, as her name suggests, and it is important that she does not become a victim in any sense. There should be no witch hunt surrounding any of us who do our jobs and champion our constituents.

I welcomed what the Minister said in introducing the victims strategy, which is an important piece of the jigsaw that includes the need to reduce crime overall, to secure justice for victims and to reassure people and make them feel safe. The serious violence strategy, the Offensive Weapons Bill, the forthcoming domestic abuse Bill and this victims strategy should be all of a piece rather than working in isolation.

If the Minister wants any advice on how to roll out the strategy and make it a really meaningful document, he could do worse than come down to the Churchill Room at 7 o’clock this evening. Coincidentally, a couple of my constituents, Ray and Vi Donovan, will be attending a dinner there. They run the Chris Donovan Trust. What happened to them was this. Chris was walking along the street with his brother one day. He was beaten up, left to die, run over and dragged by a car—murdered, 16 years ago.

Ray and Vi, who naturally experienced a lot of anger and horror at losing their child, have turned that horror, that anger and frustration, into an incredible charity. They actually met the perpetrators who served their sentence, and they now go out into prisons and schools and work on restorative justice. They realise that victims are not just the people who have lost loved ones, and that any serious crime such as murder creates any number of victims because people’s lives are written off.
Ray and Vi also work with other charities. Along with the right hon. Member for Carshalton and Wallington (Tom Brake), who is in the Chamber, I attended an awards ceremony that they hosted recently. They present awards to other small charities, typically run by the families of other victims of serious crime who have been murdered. They have taken that negative energy and turned it into something really positive to prevent people from going down the same path and creating more victims. One of the people to whom they awarded a prize was the Victims’ Commissioner for London, Claire Waxman, who had suffered a horrendous amount of abuse from a long-term stalker.

I have often spoken about domestic abuse in this place, and I am glad that the subject has arisen now. We must go further in ensuring that we support domestic abuse victims fully. A family member has gone through some harrowing times over the last few years because of her controlling, coercive partner. Fortunately, she did not have to be cross-examined, but that is not always the case, despite the Government’s best efforts. I know that many courts are working to try to separate entrances—certainly in the criminal courts people cannot be cross-examined by the alleged perpetrator, but in the family courts they can. Organisations such as Women’s Aid have given many examples of that.

Debbie Abrahams (Oldham East and Saddleworth) (Lab): I do not know whether the hon. Gentleman’s constituent has been affected by the fact that universal credit payments are made to only one member of the household, but that can make the position even worse for families in which domestic abuse is an issue. He might like to have a word with the Secretary of State, who does not seem to want to introduce split payments to this flawed process.

Paul Scully: I do not think that that applies in the case that I have mentioned, but the hon. Lady has made a very interesting point.

We need to do more to ensure that victims cannot be questioned by perpetrators, which, effectively, extends suffering for many years.

There have been more than 100 victims in London this year. We have seen victim after victim portrayed in photographs in the Evening Standard. That senseless loss of life is often, but not solely, a result of gang activities. It is important to remember these victims’ names, from Kyal Parnell, who was only 17 and who was stabbed in Tulse Hill on New Year’s Eve, to Sandra Zmijan, whose body was found in a back garden in west London only about three weeks ago, on 24 September.

Just this week I was walking through Victoria station on my way to Westminster, as I usually do on my daily commute, and saw members of the Metropolitan police and some family members and activists handing out leaflets and posters. They wanted to find one of the most wanted people, Shane O’Brien. He murdered someone three years ago, and we must not forget his victim’s name: Josh Hanson, who was murdered in Eastcote in Hillingdon three years ago. They are trying to find Shane O’Brien and bring him to justice, so that Josh Hanson’s family, who are victims as well, can have some justice. If anybody can help, the incident room can be reached on 0208 785 8099, or people can report via Crimestoppers. We need to look at all these things as part of a holistic solution in London and across the country.

That wider solution includes ensuring we can protect our police on the street. I am working closely, as our party’s vice-chairman for London, with Shaun Bailey, who is talking about putting 1,000 more police on the street, using lessons from New York, which is utilising artificial intelligence and technology to release police from certain activities and on to the frontline. But this is not just about money, although that is important—I know every London MP of every political hue calls for extra resource for the Met police; it is also about how that money is spent. The Met police have £110 million from Government—from the precept, and therefore from the Mayor as well. So this has come from right across the board: the Mayor has the money, and he has given it to the Met police, and now we have to make sure that they can use it effectively to recruit the policemen we need.

We must move on from that consideration, too, because by the time someone has a knife in their hand and a policeman has found them, it is too late. We need to reach these people far earlier—not at secondary school, but at primary school.

The victims strategy fits well in the London knife crime context not just through the ability to give someone who has been a victim and is a member of a gang the emotional support they need, but by having a way of removing them from the situation that would allow them to enter into gang retribution, so that we can break the cycle. The victims strategy can be used as a method of breaking the cycle, too.

Tom Brake (Carshalton and Wallington) (LD): I thank my near constituency neighbour for giving way, and he is right: he and I have attended many events to commemorate the work done by Ray and Vi Donovan. Does the hon. Gentleman agree that restorative justice must be part of a holistic solution for victims? Even in very serious cases, for instance involving people who have been assaulted, some victims find that restorative justice can contribute and help them even if they have been badly affected by a crime.

Paul Scully: The right hon. Gentleman is right. I have no idea how Ray and Vi Donovan had the chutzpah and courage to meet the people who murdered their son. They have such an inner strength, and they still exude that to this day; people can see that every time they meet them. The right hon. Gentleman is right that to understand can bring some sense of closure and sense that justice can be served in full, so that a victim’s family and friends can move on with their lives as well.

The victims code is already in place, but research for the strategy found that people do not know that the code is there; only 18% of victims understand that it exists, so often they do not know what support is available for them. The strategy talks about the fact that the utmost respect should be afforded to victims and so forth. These are basic requirements, frankly, that we would expect everybody to already appreciate. None the less it cannot be said loudly enough that there is a strategy. Too often in any area of government these
considerations can be lost in bureaucracy and we can forget that these are real people—that they are individuals who need individual, tailor-made support.

I have talked about domestic violence refuges around the country and the £18.8 million of welcome funding that is already going into accommodation services. I urge the Minister and the Government to make sure that that money goes into supporting local authorities, as they are best placed to know the resource needed in their local area, but they might not always have the capacity and expertise to be able to roll that out, because we know that two thirds of women fleeing domestic violence are not going to want to stay in their local area. They will have to move from their local area, so just going to their local authority is not necessarily enough. Any move the Government can make to support local authorities in adding expertise will be gratefully received, rather than just letting them tackle that in isolation.

I welcome the Minister’s words about the greater use of video. That is fundamental, and will ensure that victims do not have to make testimony after testimony, repeating the experience they have had and bringing it back to them. Instead they can have a sense of finality and closure by reporting it once, getting through their testimony once, and then bringing the perpetrator to justice. That will speed up the system and allow victims to move on with their lives.

2.16 pm

Sarah Champion (Rotherham) (Lab): I thank those in the Chamber for their kind words. We all do the best that we possibly can for our constituents and the most vulnerable, and sometimes the consequences of doing so are a little startling, but colleagues have given me the confidence to keep on going, and I appreciate that.

Like many in this House, I regularly meet victims of crime before, during and after their involvement with the judicial process. Regrettably, very few have ever received the level of care, support and service that they should be able to expect. Sadly, what I hear most often is how traumatic the experience was. Survivors of child sexual exploitation will invariably tell me that their encounter with the judicial system was a second form of abuse.

The Minister’s commitment to victims is admirable, and I will do all I can to support him in making the long overdue changes both in practice and the law, but we must now see real changes in how we support victims of crime. The Government’s plan to address the current deficit is most welcome, but we now need to focus on the detail. There are statements about co-ordinating and about combining and reviewing the effectiveness of funding, but, with the exception of the £8 million increase in funding for sexual assault referral centres—SARCs—over the next three years, there appears to be little additional money entering the system. The Government’s plans to reform the current funding streams do not appear to be fully formed. Minister, what is actually needed is simply more cash in the system.

In the strategy, it is acknowledged that in the current system for some victims, “support is not always available as and when victims need it.” That is correct, but it is the solution to this problem that we look to the Minister to deliver.

There are two areas of consideration in terms of victim support: first, the provision of early intervention services at the point of disclosure, such as SARC; and, secondly, the accessibility of universal long-term services, such as mental health support, housing and benefits to victims in need of ongoing support. SARCs are of course crucial. A Council of Europe study found that there needs to be one sexual assault centre for every 400,000 women. According to the Office for National Statistics, there are currently 28 million women in England, but there are only 47 SARCs, leaving us 14 short of the recommended minimum standard. Please will the Minister look at making sure that this gap in provision is addressed, and that there is a SARC for everyone, regardless of where they live?

Providing such services is not just good for the victim; it is also good for justice. Bristol university has just demonstrated the vital role of independent sexual violence advisers—ISVAs—in improving criminal justice outcomes. Analysis of 585 rape cases showed that 36% had the support of ISVAs. Where an ISVA was involved, 43.2% of suspects were charged, as against 21.5% without their involvement. Convictions followed a similar pattern: a 12.3% conviction rate if the victim had an ISVA, as against 5.4% if they did not.

Predominantly, victims services are commissioned by police and crime commissioners using grant funding, but they are hamstrung by the Ministry of Justice, which generally makes grants on an annual basis. This means that small charities receive only short-term funding, which contributes to precarious finances, job insecurity and an inability to plan, making it much harder for them to invest in local services for the long term. As part of the review, will the Minister please commit to additional funding for services that act as first responders to victims, and consider granting PCCs grants for victims services for a period of more than one year?

The need for long-term support for services becomes even more pressing as there is so little detail in the strategy on securing such support for victims. SARCs and other victims services are brilliant at providing an emergency care package and then referring on to other services, yet too many victims receiving an assessment of their needs at a SARC face delays in accessing the recommended therapeutic services. The situation is worse for child victims. A University College London study this year found that 80% of girls aged between 13 and 17 experiencing sexual assault had at least one mental health disorder after five months, and that 55% had at least two. Last year, the Children’s Commissioner said: “We know that most adult mental health problems start in childhood and that without treatment, children’s problems are likely to get worse.”

It is therefore appalling that Public Health England found in 2016 that only 25% of children who needed mental health treatment received it.

Where statutory services are unable to support victims, third sector organisations desperately try to make up the shortfall. Organisations such as Rape Crisis provide vital lifelines for victims and survivors in their time of crisis, yet they are unable to meet the demand with their current levels of funding. More than 6,000 women and girls are currently on Rape Crisis’s waiting list, and in my constituency, the Rotherham abuse counselling service has 260 people on its current waiting list. The average waiting time is now seven months. Not to address this is
not only morally but fiscally irresponsible. To support victims of crime in a professional and timely manner enables them to quickly rebuild their lives. If we do not do that, the cost to the state resulting from, for example, mental health issues, drug and alcohol dependency, self-harm and issues around maintaining a job or relationship as a result of the crime will cost the state much more in the long term, not to mention the damage to the individual. Because of this, I urge the Minister to consider providing good-quality, statutory, immediate interventions followed by a seamless transition to statutory longer-term care for every victim and survivor of crime.

The victims strategy is an excellent first step, but for it to become more than words on a page, it must place a statutory duty on PCCs to publish a local victims’ offer that sets out the minimum standards for supporting victims. It is my view, given their responsibility for commissioning victims’ services, that PCCs are the best placed to co-ordinate this offer. It should include details of the services they are commissioning and the contributions of other key partners, including local authorities, health services and the third sector. Such an approach would force co-operation and encourage transparency, requiring local partners to use their funding and expertise to plug the gaps in the existing provision. The Victims’ Commissioner could then be mandated to hold the PCCs and partner agencies to account for the quality of their victims’ offer against an agreed gold standard.

Tom Brake: Does the hon. Lady think that PCCs might have a role to play in ensuring that all those who need to be trained to identify victims are properly trained to do so? I am talking about not only specialist staff but everyone in the voluntary sector, the police and elsewhere. In order to ensure that those services, which are often in great demand, can be accessed by victims, we need to ensure that those people have the right training to identify the victims in the first place.

Sarah Champion: I agree with the right hon. Gentleman’s point. I know that a number of businesses are now training staff and colleagues to recognise the signs of domestic abuse and to support the victim by signposting the issue to the right agency.

I am now going to turn to my pet project. It involves a Government agency that is wilfully traumatising victims and operating a subjective system that often runs in the face of the law. Accompanying the announcement of the new victims strategy, it is most welcome that the Minister has announced a broad review of the criminal injuries compensation scheme and of the agency that administers it, the Criminal Injuries Compensation Authority—CICA. The scheme exists to provide compensation to victims of crime. Money can of course never heal the wounds, physical or mental, suffered by the victims of crime, but victims should at least be able to expect to receive the compensation to which they are entitled without those mental wounds being reopened by the administration body set up to support them. In short, CICA needs a radical overhaul to make it a victim-centred agency.

Victims’ needs, their rights and their wellbeing should be at the core of everything CICA does, but the reality is very different. My constituents’ experiences of CICA have been that it exists not to support them, to honestly assess their claims or to award redress for their suffering, but rather to pursue every possible option to deny their claims. This can include questioning their injury, questioning the rulings of courts, or more appallingly, accusing them of complicity in their abuse. At every turn, CICA ignores the needs of victims in order to maintain its balance sheet. The Minister’s review of the scheme cannot come soon enough for victims. Having supported a number of constituents through the process of making a claim, and through my extensive work with victims charities and organisations, it is abundantly clear to me that what is needed is a complete change in the culture of CICA and in how it treats the victims of crime. To be blunt, CICA’s attitude to victims stinks.

I first became aware of the failings of CICA as I was supporting victims and survivors of the appalling child sexual exploitation that took place in Rotherham. As the victims came forward and the investigations and prosecutions progressed, a number of my constituents pursued compensation through the criminal injuries compensation scheme. Those young women had been through the most horrendous abuse. Their childhoods were stolen from them by criminal gangs who groomed them, trafficked them and repeatedly raped them. For many, the psychological damage they suffered as children continues to haunt them years later, yet many of their claims for compensation were denied by CICA. Problematically, the rules of the scheme state that victims and survivors who have convictions, even for completely unrelated issues, must have their compensation awards reduced or withheld. This rule is particularly pertinent in cases of child sexual exploitation.

Bob Stewart: I thank the hon. Lady for allowing me to intervene on her. She is a friend. In her experience, how long after the crime does it take for someone to get compensation, on average?

Sarah Champion: I would love to be able to give an answer to my hon. Friend, but the problem with CICA is that it does not publish—or, indeed, seem to work to—an agreed timetable. So the answer is that it is as long as a piece of string for some victims, and interminably long for others.

I want to return to what happens between CICA and children who have suffered sexual exploitation and abuse. As a result of their abuse, they are very likely to carry out some form of crime. Manipulating children to commit offences is a widely documented part of grooming and coercive control. I find it outrageous that what effectively amounts to a symptom of abuse—carrying out a crime—should be held against victims in order to deny them compensation. More outrageous still is the denial of such claims by CICA on the ground that a victim somehow consented to their abuse.

The scheme compensates only those survivors who did not “in fact” consent to a crime. CICA has chosen to interpret this to mean that even the very youngest of children who have been the victims of sexual abuse can be denied compensation if there is any evidence that they complied with their abuser. Minister, maybe you can explain to the House why it is that children who are the victims of sexual exploitation do not deserve compensation because they ‘consented’—in your eyes—to what was done to them. What would happen if they did not, or because they were so controlled and mentally manipulated that not to comply would never have been a consideration. The law is abundantly
clear when it comes to consent: where a person is under the age of 16, sexual activity is automatically criminal unless the victim is older than 13 and the defendant reasonably believes that he or she is over 16. That CICA should effectively ignore this and, through a process that is wholly opaque, find that a child provided consent is shocking. In response to concerns raised by me and others, new guidelines on consent have been issued to CICA, but flaws in the scheme itself remain, as does CICA’s attitude towards victims.

I want to pay tribute to a Rotherham survivor of CSE, Sammy Woodhouse, who has used her experience of CICA to campaign on this issue. I will read a section of the letter she received from CICA about her compensation claim:

“I am not satisfied that your consent was falsely given as a result of being groomed by the offender. The evidence does not indicate that you were manipulated or progressively lured into a false relationship.”

Based on that, Sammy’s application was rejected. Imagine the impact that receiving that letter had on her. In her opinion, the state was saying that she was complicit in her own abuse. I am glad to say that Sammy had the strength to appeal and had the decision overturned, but many other victims do not have that strength. For the record, Sammy’s abuser is currently serving 35 years. The judge believed Sammy; CICA did not. A freedom of information request showed that 700 child victims of sexual abuse were similarly refused payments in the past five years. Will the Minister please review those cases to check whether similar injustices have happened?

CICA’s apparent determination to deny claims at all costs is exemplified by the experience of another of my constituents—not a survivor of abuse, but a former police officer injured in the line of duty. My constituent suffers from post-traumatic stress disorder as a result. They first made a claim in 2013, and it was finally settled earlier this year following numerous court rulings in the applicant’s favour and only after two interventions from me.

Throughout the claim, CICA presented various arguments as to why it should not be accepted, culminating in a court ruling that settled all outstanding disputes in my constituent’s favour and directed CICA to conclude the case. Yet CICA’s response was to question whether my constituent even suffered from PTSD, something for which extensive medical evidence was provided and had even previously been ruled upon by a court. Having been asked to again prove that they suffered from the condition, my constituent understandably determined that CICA would simply present argument after argument, each of which they would be forced to counter, only to start the whole process again. My constituent concluded, not unreasonably, that CICA sought to draw out the process in the hope that they would simply give up. That kind of seemingly endless process, with no clear timescales nor explanation of what is happening with a claim, is unprofessional as it is unfair. Yet that seems to be standard practice for CICA.

Of course, it is important that CICA assesses the eligibility of claims under the scheme and that claims are subjected to appropriate checks, but if CICA fails to support victims of crime, fails to include them in the process, fails to explain that process to them and fails to make decisions in a reasonable timeframe, it is not helping victims; it is harming them. The scheme itself often fails to make any accommodation for circumstance, something which CICA proceeds to exacerbate by failing, or being unable, to take account of context in its decision making. By way of example, paragraph 23 of the scheme states:

“An award will be withheld unless the applicant has cooperated as far as reasonably practicable in bringing the assailant to justice.”

The paragraph’s intent is clear, but the real world is rarely so straightforward.

I am aware of several cases in which individuals providing care to vulnerable adults with challenging behaviour have been assaulted in the course of their work. Many such victims understandably choose not to pursue criminal charges against their assailant—although some do. If as a consequence, the victims are ineligible for compensation under the scheme and CICA denies their claims. Yet these crimes are no less severe and the harm they suffer is no less acute. The scheme must, so far as is practical, allow for such context to be taken into account. I am delighted that the Minister has already committed to abolish the so-called same-roof rule. That much-needed change overturns a profound injustice that has lingered for far too long. However, I ask the Minister not to take his foot off the pedal. Survivors are already coming to me with concerns about the timescale.

Fundamentally, if the Government are serious about reform, they cannot allow the criminal injuries compensation scheme and CICA to continue as they are. Revised guidelines on consent are a welcome step, but CICA can only interpret the scheme, which is fundamentally flawed when it comes to child abuse. In particular, the scheme fails to acknowledge grooming as a crime of violence. That arguably excludes victims of CSE if their abuse does not include sexual contact. Consequently, serious crimes, such as exploiting children to perform sexual acts online, are not compensated, even for extremely young children. On unspent convictions, a recent High Court ruling found that three women forced into prostitution as teenagers will no longer have to disclose related convictions to potential employers. It is high time that the criminal injuries compensation scheme took a similar sensible approach to the award of compensation to victims of crime who have unrelated criminal convictions.

The review must carefully assess how CICA currently operates in order to deliver a victim-focused agency. Small changes, such as the provision of concrete timeframes to claimants and clear explanations of the claims process, would go a long way to improving the journey for victims of crime. It is also important to promote the scheme, because most of the claimants with whom I have dealt discovered the scheme by accident, rather than through a formal process of victim support. Most important, however, is a change of attitude. It must be made clear to CICA that its job is to administer the scheme fairly and transparently. It should be made clear that it is not CICA’s role to deploy every possible delaying tactic and every conceivable legal argument to seek to deny victims of crime the compensation to which they should be entitled. The victims strategy and the review of the criminal injuries compensation scheme present a timely opportunity to deliver fundamental cultural change to how we treat victims of crime. I hope that the Government will reflect on the concerns raised in this debate and ensure that this opportunity is not squandered.
Eddie Hughes (Walsall North) (Con): This is just my luck. I come to the Chamber to make two brief but personal points only to be preceded by a subject matter expert. The hon. Member for Rotherham (Sarah Champion) is clearly a black belt in all details relating to this topic, so before I even begin my speech I feel somewhat inadequate—

Gavin Newlands: Hear, hear. [Laughter.]

Eddie Hughes: Not funny. However, I will proceed with my speech anyway.

On 28 September, according to the Express & Star, a young man in my constituency was involved in an altercation with some other boys. This 10-year-old lad was wearing hearing aids at the time, but they were pulled off his ears and stamped on during the altercation. The incident was reported in the local newspaper and clearly struck a chord with the local community. Earlier on, my hon. Friend the Member for Braintree (James Cleverly) mentioned the idea that the compensation scheme should be “pacey” and the hon. Member for Rotherham just highlighted the fact that there is no timetable for compensation, but I am delighted to say that the good people of Beechdale and Walsall moved quicker than that.

Michelle Mansell set up a crowdfunding page through JustGiving. She intended to try to raise £500, stating on the page that she wanted to show the boy that there are more good people out there than bad. That £500 target was quickly reached and surpassed, so she then set the bar at £1,500. Just before I got up to speak, I noticed that the current amount is £5,778, which just goes to show that while the victims strategy is valid and while it has, we must accept that there will always be victims of crime, which is why the strategy is so valid.

Like many other people, I would obviously like to see more police on our streets. I have lobbied the Chancellor and the Policing Minister to achieve that, but a conversation that I had with a chief constable some time ago encapsulated part of the problem and the reason for this victims strategy. He said that the police can do anything, but they cannot do everything. If there is a problem with crime in a particular area, the police could flood in and massively reduce or eradicate the crime, but that would only create crime in areas from where resources had been redeployed. Regardless of how many police we have, we must accept that there will always be victims of crime, which is why the strategy is so valid.

Before I became an MP, I worked for YMCA in Birmingham, a homeless charity for young people providing 300 units of accommodation. We set up our business to ensure that senior members of staff were based in areas where we offered residential accommodation, so the opportunity to see young people who were having the benefit of our services on a daily basis was a natural part of the job and there I heard stories of young people who had lived in families where domestic violence was prevalent. This is not just a UK problem. I briefly read a report from UNICEF that suggests that at any one time there might be as many as 275 million children facing the problem around the world. The problem is huge and complex, because the exposure to that domestic violence might take many forms. The children might witness it first hand, they might be in another room listening, or they might be upstairs lying on their bed frightened about what is occurring.

The treatment of this problem and the support given to those young people will take many different forms, so I was delighted to read the prospectus that the Government produced in July setting out how people could apply for a chunk of that £8 million of funding. My understanding is that the minimum grant people would apply for is £500,000, and one of the most important things in considering those applications for funding is that the project being proposed should be scalable and should demonstrate interaction with other parties. Many stakeholders should be involved. Why? Because the experience those children will have will manifest itself in many different ways. With some resilient children, it might be hardly noticeable, but with others it might have some serious psychological effects. The terrible thing would be that the change in their behaviour would be interpreted by those who interact with them, perhaps by social workers or school teachers, as having a different source, so it is incredibly important that we provide funds to ensure absolutely that we provide all the support we can for the 825,000 children who might be experiencing domestic violence in their home. That is why I so strongly welcome the report presented by the Minister.

Vicky Foxcroft (Lewisham, Deptford) (Lab): I will try to keep my remarks brief, as I do not want to repeat the comments made by many colleagues this afternoon. I do want to echo some of the points that have been made, however, particularly by those who have pointed out that we have been waiting for this strategy for far too long. The Government promised in 2015 to enshrine rights for victims in law. Three years later, the Government are still not announcing primary legislation but, instead, another consultation, which we are told to expect some time next year.

For it to take more than three years to achieve this is, quite frankly, not good enough. I know from people in my constituency about their issues as victims struggling to navigate the criminal justice system. They have suffered delays in responses, a lack of communication and have even found out that offenders have been released without their knowledge.

A survivor of sexual assault from my constituency told me she felt “punished” by the system. After being raped, she had to wait months before her case was sent to the CPS. There were delays in the case and, during that time, the rapist had been accused of sexually assaulting someone else. More delays took place while the CPS decided if the cases would be tried separately, together or at all. She then found out that some of her evidence was lost by the police, creating yet more delays. Following all this pressure, she developed post-traumatic stress disorder and had to take a lot of time off work, hugely impacting her career. Until the case is closed, it is impossible for her to move on with her recovery. Every time she has to deal with the police, it triggers her PTSD.
The experience many victims have of the criminal justice system is frankly disgraceful. We need a victims law with teeth and I am concerned that without huge changes across Government, victims’ experience of the criminal justice system will not get better. How can the Government seriously improve the experiences of victims while slashing funding for legal aid and cutting police budgets?

In the past eight years, 21,000 police officers have been axed across the country. Police forces are stretched, and the number of cases that are closed without being resolved keeps increasing. This year, the number of rape cases resulting in a conviction was the lowest in a decade, and the CPS was criticised for dropping cases despite strong evidence. It is no surprise that many victims are left wondering whether they should have even bothered reporting something to begin with.

In my constituency, I know that members of my community have been reluctant to speak to the police in the wake of violent crimes. Witnesses worry about their safety when speaking out, especially in areas where trust in the police is low. I am thinking of one family in particular. My constituent Sharon’s son was murdered three years ago. Sharon never felt supported by the judicial system. There was no emotional or practical support. When her son’s case went to a retrial, Sharon had to go through the pain of reliving her ordeal all over again, but if justice had been served, it would have been worth while. At the end of the retrial, the case was closed without any convictions.

The lack of a conviction has been devastating for Sharon and her family, but it has also had an impact on the wider community. When such cases are left unresolved, it can damage a community’s faith in the criminal justice system and make it less likely that witnesses will come forward in future.

Then there are the cuts to legal aid. The number of people standing up in court with no legal advice or representation has risen unacceptably under this Government. Last year, two out of three people appearing in court had no legal representation whatsoever. That is shameful. One family in my constituency resorted to crowdfunding for legal fees after their daughter died in the care of a private mental health clinic. Her family want to make sure nothing like this ever happens again, but they had no automatic right to legal aid for an inquest. They met obstacles at every stage. Reviews were cancelled at the last moment; the coroner was dismissive and aggressive to them on the phone, and they had to fight for a judicial review to replace the coroner, which would not have been possible without crowdfunding yet again from the public. I agree with the hon. Member for Walsall North (Eddie Hughes), who said that although it is great that people give to crowdfunding appeals, we should not always rely on that.

Access to justice must be a fundamental, democratic right. Instead, we have reached a point where justice is for those lucky enough to afford it. For all the families who have been impacted, in Lewisham Deptford and across the country, we must seek a victims law as soon as possible. They should not have to wait any longer.

Mr Tanmanjeet Singh Dhesi (Slough) (Lab): I welcome this debate on victims’ rights and look forward to the Minister’s response. I also welcome the fact that the Government have committed to overhauling their victims of crime strategy. There is widespread recognition that the system needs to change. We have seen some welcome improvements in the way in which victims of crime are treated, but they have been piecemeal and unco-ordinated. As many right hon. and hon. Members will know from talking to constituents who have been victims of crime or from their conversations with the police, probation officers or victim support groups, our current system is just not working.

For many victims of crime, especially children, victims of sexual assault and rape, and victims of racially aggravated crimes, the system is simply not fit for purpose. As my hon. Friend the Member for Lewisham, Deptford (Vicky Foxcroft) eloquently explained, the cuts to legal aid have had even more damaging effects on access to justice. At Reading Crown court last month, an offender was sentenced to five years for assault and robbery in a car park in my constituency. The victim, a 39-year-old man, was forced to strip naked and was left utterly humiliated. The criminal will be free in a couple of years, but his victim will carry the trauma like a yoke on his shoulders for the rest of his days. How confident are we that the victim will get the lifelong support he will need?

The system remains complex, confusing and alienating for victims. The Criminal Injuries Compensation Authority is creaking, cumbersome and slow. As has been highlighted earlier, the system fails to recognise the impact of crime on mental health—that is particularly pertinent, as we marked Mental Health Awareness Day yesterday—and the lasting damage beyond the mere material to a victim’s wellbeing. It may be a cliché, but it is true: a victim of crime suffers twice, once at the hands of the criminal and again at the hands of the criminal justice system.

Right hon. and hon. Members may recall that a crime was committed just outside Parliament in February when my guest Ravneet Singh, a committed internationalist and environmentalist, was assualted. The assailant grabbed and tried to remove his turban. Sikhs consider the turban to be a crown on the head and, therefore, sacrosanct. This left Mr Singh humiliated and hurt, and potentially with a terrible impression of our country and our Parliament. Many Sikhs who choose to wear a turban are victims of this type of assault—I have been myself—and I am sorry to say that often the authorities have failed to take it seriously, despite the deep offence and dismay it causes.

Other crimes, such as domestic violence, child abuse, sexual assault and stalking, have not been taken seriously enough by our system. Most victims of those crimes do not even come forward, with some estimates suggesting that 85% of serious sexual assaults are not even reported. So we need a new approach: a massive cultural shift that turns our criminal justice system into a criminal justice service, with victims at the heart, not the edges. Citizens must believe that the system is on their side and will work for them.

I am proud to say that in 2015 the Labour party published the comprehensive report of its victims taskforce. That was led by Baroness Doreen Lawrence, Peter
Neyroud, the former Thames Valley chief constable, and my right hon. and learned Friend the Member for Holborn and St Pancras (Keir Starmer). It is a great shame that the 14 recommendations were not implemented, as that would have given us the joined-up, victim-centred system we so desperately need. The centrepiece of the report is the call for a single, clear victims law enshrining the rights of victims across the entire criminal justice system. I restate my support today for a single, transparent victims law. It would give victims access to justice from their very first dealings with the police and beyond, into dealings with the courts and prison service. The role of the Victims’ Commissioner would be enhanced. Every police area should have an area victims plan, evaluated and approved by the Victims’ Commissioner. Victims should have the right to a review if the police or prosecutors drop a case, as so often happens. Victims should have the right to information and updates, and not be left for months in the dark. In particular, when a victim of a crime comes forward, their allegation must be recorded and allocated a crime number. That is supported by the code of conduct and by the EU directive on victims’ rights, yet the evidence shows there has been slippage, especially in cases of domestic violence and sexual assault.

We must ensure that the system does not judge victims of crime based on lazy stereotypes of how a victim is supposed to behave, especially when it comes to sexual assault and rape. We need only to look at recent events in the United States and the shameful treatment of Dr Christine Blasey Ford during the Kavanaugh confirmation hearings. I hope that the whole House will commend the courage of Dr Christine Blasey Ford and condemn utterly the way that President Trump mocked her testimony in public. We may hope and pray that nothing like that could ever happen here, but for thousands of women in the British criminal justice system, their treatment is no less humiliating, as explained by previous speakers.

Lastly, there is the crucial question of funding. The truth is that eight years of austerity have left our criminal justice system less robust, less able to support victims of crime. I raised these issues during a recent Westminster Hall debate on continued Government court closures that I had the honour of opening. The Minister in charge of a system in meltdown. The Crown Prosecution Service has seen its budget cut by a quarter since 2010 and staff numbers have fallen by 2,400; the head of the CPS and the head of the probation service have resigned amid chaos; and prison violence and suicide rates are rising.

There are fewer police on the streets. Earlier this year, in my own area, the Thames Valley police reported a shortfall of 98 officers and further cuts of £14.3 million until 2020-21. Of course, that has a negative impact on the victims of crime. Were the criminal justice system a school, it would now be in special measures; were it a school, it would now be in special measures; were it a school, it would now be in special measures; were it a school, it would now be in special measures; were it a school, it would now be in special measures; were it a school, it would now be in special measures; were it a school, it would now be in special measures; were it a school, it would now be in special measures. Of course, that has a negative impact on the victims of crime. That was highlighted in this week’s “Dispatches” on screening out crimes. There is a danger that services to victims will come a poor second priority to operational demands.

Recently, I met my excellent chief superintendent who operates not just in Oldham, but in Rochdale and Tameside—when I was first elected, he was just based in Oldham, but now he has to cover three areas. I know that the force struggles to deal with the full range of policing duties. It is at crisis point, as the police have to cover many issues that, previously, social services, particularly children’s social services, would have dealt with. What will happen to those forces in the future? We do need greater support for victims in the policing system, so what will happen to that support given the difficulties that the force currently faces?

This week, the Victims’ Commissioner for London and founder of Voice4Victims, Claire Waxman, stated:’

“The Government’s victims strategy aims to improve victims’ experiences, but unless they address the cuts to police funding, victims will continue to feel ‘ignored’. This impacts communities who will feel vulnerable and at risk.”
In addition, the closure of more than 230 courts since 2010 leads to victims facing longer travelling times, and that is hardly offset by the improvement in waiting facilities, which was also promised in the strategy.

The victims code was a significant and positive development when it was introduced in 2005 and it should be supported, but although its provisions remain important, they are not directly enforceable, which is why a victims’ law is so urgently needed. I gently repeat my disappointment that, in addition to the concerns about cuts to the criminal justice system and more widely to public services as a whole, we have not had that commitment to the victims law.

I welcome many measures in the strategy, including the reform of the criminal injuries compensation fund. However, the description given by my hon. Friend the Member for Rotherham (Sarah Champion) of the organisation that manages that fund was absolutely shocking. I congratulate her on once again on everything that she does for victims of child sexual exploitation. It is important that we fund that system so that we address the significant financial pressures that victims face. Also welcome is the promise of new guidance on pre-trial therapy and the recognition of the need for dedicated support for victims, but we need to go further.

PC Nicola Hughes was one of my constituents. Members will remember that she, along with her colleague PC Fiona Bone, was cruelly murdered six years ago in the line of duty. Nicola’s father, Bryn Hughes, has suggested that more needs to be done to provide immediate financial help for practical things such as funeral costs and travelling costs to and from courts. As a divorced parent, he has said that more needs to be done to ensure that both parents are supported and kept informed during and after the investigation and trial. Again, that does not always happen.

I have to say that I was horrified to hear about the family of our former colleague, PC Keith Palmer. They were not able to get legal aid and had to rely on pro bono support when it came to the inquest. Surely that shames us all. Given the dedication and support that our police officers give, that really does show how much they have been let down.

Many campaigners have also expressed disappointment that there is no commitment to appointing the independent advocates for victims as a single point of contact to help navigate the criminal justice system. I recognise the role of the public advocate, but, as described, it is not broad enough as those advocates will not be able to represent bereaved families at inquiries or at inquests. Again, I would welcome hearing something from the Minister on that.

Last month, when the Minister presented his statement on the strategy, I raised the very distressing case of Liane Singleton, who was brutally murdered in 1998 by Paul Stowers. What the family went through was really atrocious. Liane was mutilated and her body parts were put in bin bags. It was horrendous. How any parent can recover from that, I have no idea.

Liane’s parents, Gordon and Jacky Singleton, are my constituents. They have been trying to prevent the release of Stowers by petitioning Parliament back in July. Last month, they found out that they had failed and he is due to be released next month. They felt dreadfully let down by the criminal justice system and totally powerless to influence the Parole Board. I know that the Parole Board will be taking steps to ensure that there is a presumption that a victim’s personal statement can be read in hearings.

Vicky Foxcroft: From experience in my constituency, I know about the horrific events that people go through, and having to relive them causes trauma for families and local communities. Does my hon. Friend agree that this is why it is so important that we get a victims law?

Debbie Abrahams: I am grateful to my hon. Friend for intervening to give me a moment. It has been quite traumatic just listening to Jacky and Gordon, but it puts into context the importance of what we are doing here, including all of us who have stayed to represent our constituents.

The Parole Board will listen to the personal statement, but I welcome anything the Minister can say about how this will be taken forward. He mentioned that this will be reviewed in January, but I would welcome a bit more detail about that and the new rules that will be required.

I share the view of the Victims’ Commissioner, Baroness Newlove, that any challenge mechanism should not require members of the public to have to crowd fund to pay for legal representation, and that a reconsideration process should be judge-led. Recognising that it is likely that the majority of reconsideration applicants will be offenders, will the Minister commit to a speedy and properly funded process to ensure that the benefits to victims of having the right to challenge a decision is not outweighed by the distress caused to other victims of waiting months for a final parole outcome?

I have met with the group Justice After Acquittal, founded by another constituent, Ann Roberts, and Carole Longe, to whom I pay tribute for their many years of hard work and campaigning for murder victims’ families. As the Minister will know, bereaved families are very concerned that when a family member has been killed and no one has been brought to justice, or when there has been an acquittal, there has been very little by way of a framework governing whether and when the case will be reviewed by police and prosecutors.

Last year, the national standards of support were launched by the CPS and the Metropolitan police—I pay tribute to my right hon. and learned Friend the Member for Holborn and St Pancras (Keir Starmer), who did a lot in his previous role to bring this about—and their work with Justice After Acquittal has been very much welcomed. However, I would be grateful if the Minister let me know how these standards are being monitored. How many families have been offered and have taken up the offer of a post-acquittal meeting since its introduction?

The Government should be on notice that we are not prepared to wait much longer for the victims law. Victims need to be informed, supported and listened to. They need to be able to challenge decisions on their cases now. They need their rights to be placed into law so they are central to our criminal justice system. The victims code should be put into primary legislation and independent advocates should be fully funded to draw up a support package to meet the victims’ needs, represent them in dealing with agencies and support them at every step of a trial.
[Debbie Abrahams]

I will continue to press the Minister to look again at a mechanism for providing independent advocates to help victims to navigate the complex and intimidating criminal justice system, in addition to registered intermediaries following the Victims' Commissioner's statement that the number of registered intermediaries must rise to meet demand. I do not believe that an increase of 25% is anywhere near enough.

Finally, from a victim's point of view our justice system is not fit for purpose. The family of Liane Singleton, facing the imminent release of her killer, feel let down. Others such as Carole Longe, Ann Roberts, Bryn Hughes and Claire Waxman, to name but a few, have had to campaign for years following failures in the criminal justice system to protect victims' rights. For too long, victims have felt like an afterthought in the process. The Government continue to produce strategy documents, but victims need action now. I will not let the Minister rest until he has finally introduced a victims law.

3.10 pm

Jim Shannon (Strangford) (DUP): I commend the hon. Member for Oldham East and Saddleworth (Debbie Abrahams) for her compassion and care for her constituents. We are all aware of that, but today was a supreme example of how she feels, and I congratulate her on that. I thank Mr Speaker and the House for hearing this issue. I thank the Minister and Her Majesty's Government for the hard work that they have done on the victims strategy and what they have brought forward.

I was just looking at the Front Bench and thinking that some of the Ministers entered Parliament in the same year as me and some a year or two after. It is always good to see Members of my intake who have done well, and I congratulate the Ministers on their elevation to important places. It is clear when we ask them questions that they have a deep interest in the subject matter, and that is refreshing. I also congratulate other Ministers who were present earlier.

In Northern Ireland we are attempting to clarify exactly what constitutes a victim. There would appear to be a difficulty in distinguishing between someone who is blown up by a bomb and the person who sets the bomb and then runs away from it. There is a difficulty in establishing that being shot by the armed forces in the midst of firing at them in the first instance in a terrorist attack does not make you a victim; indeed, it makes you a perpetrator. That is the Northern Ireland context.

These things have been made so complex in Northern Ireland, but that is a debate for a different day. This debate is about the victims strategy here on the mainland.

I commend all the Members who have spoken, especially the hon. Member for Rotherham (Sarah Champion). Others have said it, but I want to put it on record in Hansard that she has shown great courage, strength and determination in forwarding the case for her constituents. We have followed that in the press, and some of the press has not been very nice to her. That makes me angry and makes us all annoyed in this House. The hon. Lady needs to know that every one of us stands with her in taking her stance for justice and right. Well done.

I have been interested in victims for some 34 years in public service. I was first a councillor; then a Member of the Northern Ireland Assembly and then was privileged to be elected Member of Parliament for Strangford. This is my 34th year in public service. I have met broken men and women, the victims of crime whose lives have been irrevocably altered. Families have seen their loved one destroyed, and then retraumatised by the court case. Every Member who has spoken has referred to individual cases, and we can all do that. I shall refer to one later, without mentioning any names. Families are torn apart through no fault of their own.

It is my desire and the desire of the House that the victims strategy will seek to make changes to help those individuals and their families. I was eager to read the strategy and did so to see just how we could and would do better. I believe that, should the strategy be implemented and the heart of the strategy become a reality, it will give victims more support. The intentions of Her Majesty's Government are clear, and we welcome that.

As my mother often said, money does not grow on trees. Like most of us, I come from a home where I had love and affection, but not much else money-wise. That did not do us any harm, because it moulded us into who we are today when it comes to speaking on social issues in the Chamber.

I have concerns as to how I can see these changes brought about in Northern Ireland, as I know that the victims strategy is for England and Wales, but the concerns about implementation do not take away from the positive things in this document that I sincerely want to see implemented as a matter of urgency.

The first three key entitlements of the code are things that I have been pushing for and have been keen to see happen, and they can be summed up as better support after the crime and right through to the trial, and an acknowledgment that a statement and trial date are simply not enough. The fact is that many victims do not understand what has happened to them, and there is uncertainty about a legal process that looks convoluted and extremely detailed to them, which sows an environment of fear. I was pleased therefore to see that the code will include entitlement to a written acknowledgment that someone has reported a crime, including the basic details of the offence; an enhanced service for a victim of serious crime, a persistently targeted victim or a vulnerable or intimidated victim—that is another clear commitment by Her Majesty's Government and the Minister; and a needs assessment to help work out what support someone needs. All those things are good, and they set in train a strategy that we should all welcome and look forward to seeing implemented.

I have sat with constituents in the period between them giving their statement and hearing about the trial, and the uncertainty in between adds to the anxiety. While my staff and I may give general, generic advice, we are often unable to speak to the victim as, rightly, the halls of justice are not open for us to inquire. The standard response that they cannot comment on an ongoing case, while understandable, is not helpful for the victim and their family, who do not know how to
carry on with their life while the wheels of justice indeterminately but slowly turn, on an often lengthy journey.

The code will ensure that for serious crimes there is a detailed, enhanced service and an assessment of support needed. The indication to me is that a support worker will be available to get information and support to the victim in the interim. Can the Minister confirm that that is the case?

I welcome the commitment to a more transparent and easier-to-access compensation system. We need that. The very real and personal cases that Members have outlined show how the system has fallen down. The hon. Member for Oldham East and Saddleworth, for instance, referred to our police officer who was murdered here last year and whose family could not even access legal aid. That is an example of the injustice we see in the system. I know that the Minister is committed to seeing better compensation programmes and strategies, and I will be glad to see that.

I am pleased that there are now options to be informed if the suspect is to be prosecuted or not or given an out-of-court disposal—it is important that victims know that—and to seek a review of the police and the CPS’s decision not to prosecute, in accordance with the National Police Chiefs’ Council and CPS victims’ right to review schemes. Those are all good suggestions in the victims strategy.

I would like to ensure that when victims are given information about seeking a review, there is support in the process, as many victims do not have legal knowledge or background and find it overwhelming trying to come to terms with the foreign language of justice and protocol. We are all simple people—I am, anyway. I like to have things explained to me in nice, simple terms, and I think my constituents would like the same, because that makes it easier to follow. It is all right for those with a legal mind, and there are many Members in the Chamber who are much brighter than I am, but we must make it simple for the ordinary person, because if they can follow it, they know what they want.

I have asked the Minister to confirm that a support worker will be available, to ensure that the process is understood, and I think, from his indication, that that certainly will happen. That is what I envisage, and I hope it is what the Department envisages. I would appreciate it if the Minister addressed that in his response or at a later date, if that is suitable.

A previous speaker referred to suicide, and just in the last few days the Government have committed to appoint a suicide prevention Minister. In the legal process, people feel such trauma, pressure and anxiety that sometimes things happen. Will the Solicitor General have an opportunity during the appointment process to discuss with the person given the responsibility for tackling suicide what can be done about the traumatic and emotional pressures that can be experienced during legal processes?

As usual in a debate of this magnitude, which has so many essential elements, time has beaten me, but in the minutes remaining, I want to highlight the provisions on opting into the victim contact scheme if the offender is sentenced to 12 months or more for a specified violent or sexual offence, and subsequently making a victim personal statement for consideration by the Parole Board if the offender is considered for release or transfer; the victim may apply to the Parole Board to read out the statement at the hearing. I want to draw a case to the House’s attention, although I will not mention any names.

I have been reading lately in my local papers about one woman’s fight to ensure that a serial rapist is not released back into the community. He is a totally abhorrent, violent person, with a clear record of serial offences. The media have highlighted the fact that this serial predator—that is what he is—was released in 2013 and raped again in a different region. There is little doubt that, five years later, the danger is still there, yet this individual is up for parole. How on earth can that be the case? I have not given details or names, so I do not expect the Solicitor General to be familiar with the case. To me, there is something totally abhorrent about this case—it really makes me quite angry and upset. This absolutely inspirational woman has waived anonymity and told her horrific story in an attempt to raise awareness and stop what happened to her happening to another woman. I salute her spirit, bravery and courage, and I am sure everyone here feels the same way. The fact remains, however, that she went public because she does not have faith in the Parole Board and the justice system. She is a victim the system has let down, and her words must carry more weight.

I want to ensure that the Department takes such cases into account. I honestly believe that the Solicitor General is the person who can do that. All the stories, singular and collective, that we have recounted here show our heartfelt need for such an assurance. Any proposed strategy must make it certain that victims do not feel that their only recourse to protect others is to make their private pain a public issue.

I am also keen on videolinks for children and women who have been abused. The hon. Member for Rotherham will know about the cases in her area, but cases I have observed from a distance as a Member of Parliament, in my own area and further afield, have shown me the necessity of the protection that videolinks afford for children and women who have been abused. We have some good things in Great Britain and Northern Ireland. Last week, with other parliamentarians I visited Pakistan, where the level of sexual violence is horrendous—atrocious. We encouraged the authorities there to do some of the things we have asked Ministers here to do, such as ensuring the availability of videolinks, giving protection from perpetrators and helping to minimise the impact on victims.

I thank all those Members who have taken part in the debate. I look to the Solicitor General for a careful response. I hope he will take up some of our suggestions and answer our questions. I thank him for the steps taken thus far, which I hope will provide a solid foundation for real change in the way we treat victims of crime.

3.24 pm

**Tom Brake** (Carshalton and Wallington) (LD): Through you, Mr Deputy Speaker, may I thank Madam Deputy Speaker for letting me make a brief contribution this afternoon, and may I apologise to the Minister for not being present for his opening remarks? I particularly regret that because he provided a one-to-one briefing for my friend, Baroness Brinton, on the victims code, and he was very engaging in that process—I might refer to some of the points that she raised during that discussion.
I wish to restate the commendation made by the hon. Member for Sutton and Cheam (Paul Scully) for Ray and Vi Donovan and their work on restorative justice, because he and I find them truly inspirational. Every now and again we come across people who really have an impact, and what they have been through, and how they used it to further an invaluable cause—that of restorative justice—is inspirational and they deserve to be described in that way.

I wish to make two points. In an earlier intervention I mentioned the importance of training and of ensuring that all those who need to be able to identify victims are suitably trained. That is not just about specialist staff, because if the first point of contact is a helpline where perhaps training has not been given and a person is not identified as a victim, that person then has no chance whatsoever of accessing services. I hope that the Minister will respond briefly on training and how he sees that being taken beyond just specialist staff.

Unless the Minister did so in his opening remarks, I do not think anyone has referred to the importance of providing support to victims and their families after a homicide abroad. A number of Members may have been involved in cases—as have I—that involved serious assaults or murders that took place abroad. One case I was involved with related to a murder that allegedly took place in a Brazilian police station. Although everyone appreciates how difficult it is for families in this country to get the support they need when a homicide takes place in the UK, people will understand how much more difficult it is for families whose loved ones have been murdered abroad, given the challenges of different legal systems, languages, and criminal systems that are often far inferior to ours.

The Minister has given an undertaking that the victims strategy will consider enhancing support for victims’ families after there has been a homicide in the United Kingdom, but I hope that when he responds to the debate he will also say whether the Government will ensure parity in the support given to victims’ families when a homicide takes place abroad.

3.27 pm

Yasmin Qureshi (Bolton South East) (Lab): We have heard today some eloquent and passionate speeches about victims, the criminal system, the civil justice system, and about witnesses—especially those who see horrendous crimes. It is a pleasure for me to wind up this debate, because as somebody who was a prosecutor for 14 years and still practises criminal law thereafter, one of my roles in the Crown Prosecution Service was as a child abuse and rape specialist. I dealt with victims and witnesses who had seen some of the most horrific crimes, and exposure to such cases and to witnesses and victims makes me feel passionately about this area of public space.

Although we welcome the strategy that has been outlined, many things are missing from it, such as a timescale for when things will be rolled out, and information on what funding will be provided or how the scheme will be rolled out across the country. The strategy seems to contain ideas, but nothing about whether there will be legislation for those ideas. Some measures will clearly require legislation, and I will go into the details of that.

Apart from a fair trial, the foundation of any justice system, particularly the criminal justice system, is to ensure that the witnesses and victims of appalling crimes are treated properly during the collation of evidence, the trial process and thereafter. We have discussed violence and direct victims, but we also have to look at victims in the wider context. The experience of victims and witnesses in the criminal and civil justice system has been found wanting in several ways and many hon. Members have today touched on those issues.

My hon. Friend the Member for Lewisham, Deptford (Vicky Foxcroft) talked about cases where evidence has been lost. We know of cases where disclosure has not been done in time and the cases have been dismissed for want of prosecution. We know that the Crown Prosecution Service, the prosecuting authority, has had at least one quarter of its budget slashed. These things make a big difference to the ability of the prosecution to perform their jobs properly, in time and in due manner.

We also know that across the country, with cuts to policing and funding for specialist services, victims can often be left unsupported and exposed to further risk. Hon. Members have spoken about the fact that the victim of a crime suffers twice: once during the actual offence and once through the process in the courts. There are supposed to be systems in place in the court system, but regrettably too often they are not followed. Many victims and witnesses to appalling crimes have a really appalling experience. That needs to be addressed properly. I am afraid that the strategy document does not really deal with those issues.

I am trying not to be party political, because much of the debate has been about recognising the need for things to be done, but we cannot get away from the fact that if you cut police numbers by 20,000, if you cut the youth budget by over 50%, and if you cut the budget relating to mental health, drug rehabilitation, detoxification centres and dealing with alcohol addiction, you are going to have problems. There has been a rise in violent crimes, especially among youngsters. It is not a surprise that at the same time support to young people, diverting them away from the criminal justice system, has been cut. I say that in the spirit of the fact that these are issues that we all need to address. I know the Minister understands the criminal justice system well—we served on the Justice Committee together—as a barrister and a recorder. He is very aware of what happens in our courts. He probably knows about the problems I am talking about, too.

We have heard hon. Members talk about their constituents. My hon. Friend the Member for Slough (Mr Dhesi) and for Oldham East and Saddleworth (Debbie Abrahams) talked about the impact the cuts have had on their police forces and the criminal justice system. We must not forget the court closures that have been taking place across the country. One direct result of that has been that many victims and witnesses have to travel for hours on end to get to a court that is often on the other side of their county. Sometimes one journey takes five or six hours. That cannot be good for them. I know that for many people the thought of having to spend hours travelling will and does put them off. Those responsible for committing crimes can get away with them because witnesses do not turn up. I am sure nobody wants that situation to continue.
Many Members have asked for real changes in the law, which again the strategy document does not really talk about. For example, we have called for the immediate enactment of a law to prevent defendants having the right to cross-examine directly the victims of sexual and domestic abuse in civil cases. We know that the situation has changed in criminal cases, but the right still exists in civil cases. The Government have been promising this since 2015, but nothing has happened. A judge in the family court recently had to intervene to ask the questions because he would not allow a male respondent to cross-examine a victim regarding sexual allegations against him. Our judges should not be forced into that position; their job is to adjudicate and judge, not to get involved in the actual process. That was not a one-off case, because we know that these things are happening in reality. We need to deal with that urgently.

Another change that we need in the law—this was mentioned during the recent passage of the Voyeurism (Offences) (No. 2) Bill through this House—is the introduction of anonymity for victims of revenge porn. It is strange that victim anonymity is maintained for all other sexual offences but not for revenge porn. I do not think that the humiliation of that crime is any less distressing than it is for some of the sexual acts committed against people. I ask the Government to bring forward legislation to deal with that quickly. They will have our support 100%, so it should not take too long to get the provision in place.

We have talked about the experience of victims. I think that most people accept that introducing independent violence advocates is a must. We need to have them in place as soon as possible so that victims have a better journey through the criminal justice system and at least feel, irrespective of the result, that they have been respected, heard properly and listened to. The Victims’ Commissioner for London recently said that, given the cuts to policing and to special support services, victims can be left feeling unsupported and exposed to further risks. That applies not just to victims but to witnesses. I know that the strategy contains specific provision relating to children who might have witnessed domestic abuse. That is laudable and we welcome it, but perhaps it should be extended to other witnesses who see such horrific offences.

I try to group victims and witnesses together, because in some respects they are integral and linked, and in many cases we are talking not just about the victims who have been directly assaulted. The Criminal Cases Review Commission, the body that deals with miscarriages of justice, which are just as important, has had its budget slashed by up to 70%, which means that it is now unable to review cases properly or in a timely manner. Families facing inquests into the deaths of relatives are currently not entitled to legal aid. Indeed, the family of PC Keith Palmer, who was tragically murdered in last year’s Westminster attacks, had to seek representation pro bono in the recent inquest. It cannot be right that the state can be fully funded but ordinary individuals are not. There has to be equality of arms. Victims’ families should, as a matter of right, be entitled to legal aid in inquests without having to go through all the hurdles. It should be an automatic entitle. Councils, hospitals and Government bodies can afford the best legal brains in the country, but the poor victims’ families have to go through all the hurdles to get legal aid. I think that they should be put on an equal footing. I thought that I would leave the Criminal Injuries Compensation Authority to the end of my speech, because my hon. Friend the Member for Rotherham (Sarah Champion) certainly explained it in detail. She is absolutely right because, as everybody knows, money will not heal or remove the suffering but it can be of assistance. The way in which the CICA operates really needs to change. That is not its fault—it follows the scheme, so the scheme has to be changed. I hope that the Minister will take on board the comments on that by my hon. Friend the Member for Rotherham.

While we welcome any improvement to the current system, I would ask the Minister to address the issue of an independent domestic violence advocate, the provision for victims and witnesses in court and the need to properly fund our prosecuting authority and increase police numbers. Nothing is worse than having a case dismissed because the prosecution has not been able to get the evidence together. We know that the number of prosecutors has fallen, as has the number of caseworkers who put the cases together. The police are under the same pressures. They collate the original evidence, but many of their civilian staff, who put the case paperwork together, have also been cut. That issue needs to be addressed and those organisations properly funded. We must be able to have faith in our criminal justice system. As I have also said, the ability of defendants and respondents to cross-examine their victims directly must be sorted out immediately.

3.41 pm

The Solicitor General (Robert Buckland): Before I address all the wide-ranging and important points made in this debate, which is the start of the process that the strategy seeks to inform, may I pay personal tribute to the late Denzil Davies, whose death was reported this morning? He was the first Member of Parliament I ever met. He was my MP, and although I opposed him politically, he was a huge source of advice and encouragement to me. I probably would not be here without people like him, and I want to put on record my condolences to his family and his many friends. He was a Member of this House for 35 years and served on both Front Benches with distinction.

If the victims of crime are not heard, the interests of justice are not served. If they are not served, what meaning can the rule of law continue to have? If the rule of law is undermined, what hope do we have to continue to claim to be a civilised country? It is as fundamental as that and always has been to me. I spent 20 years or so in the criminal courts, meeting the victims of crime every day of my professional life. I have met thousands of people of all ages, from all backgrounds. I have admired their courage and I have tried to empathise with them when things have gone wrong. I have watched human experience unfold before my eyes, and I have done my best to support people who end up, through no choice of their own, in the criminal justice system.

I long ago came to the conclusion that no amount of individual good will or professionalism on the part of dedicated individuals in the system could replace a more systematic approach to the care of victims and witnesses. My former colleague on the Justice Committee, the hon. Member for Bolton South East (Yasmin Qureshi), is right to bring the two subjects together. They are indistinguishable in my mind, because there are many people who, while they have not been a direct victim,
will have witnessed some appalling events and have to live with the consequences, as well as go through the ordeal of having to give evidence.

What does it mean for a victim to seek and obtain justice? Obviously, the outcome of a criminal case is important. Rightly, we have independent judges and juries who make those decisions every day of the working week. Putting that to one side, however, I think that what it means for victims is not having to reinvent the wheel every time they come into contact with the various agencies that are responsible for the criminal justice service: not having to repeat their stories, their needs and the specific support to which they are entitled. As Members have rightly pointed out today, it also means that the authorities do not talk in jargon, but, in the words of a member of the victim liaison unit at the Crown Prosecution Service office in Yorkshire and Humberside, “speak in human being”.

I could not have put it better than that member of the team in Leeds whose job is to write letters, day in day out, to victims of crime. I pay tribute to the team’s work: they provide a particularly good example of how to do that. We in the House, who deal with thousands of letters every week, perhaps find letter-writing running of the mill, but to a victim of crime, receiving a letter from someone in authority in the CPS or the police is a significant moment. We really must do better, and get it right. I am glad to note that the CPS is redoubling its efforts, working across England and Wales to improve that vital process.

At the beginning of the debate, the Under-Secretary of State for Justice, my hon. Friend the Member for Charnwood (Edward Argar), spoke about the seamless Government’s strategy. In an intervention, my hon. Friend the Member for Bexhill and Battle (Huw Merriman) talked about the sentencing process. Again, I think that the need for the authorities to make their position clear and understandable at the right time has never been more important.

As part of my role as Solicitor General, I often conduct “unduly lenient” sentence reviews, appearing as an advocate for the Government in the Court of Appeal, so I continue to meet the victims of what are often very serious crimes, and I can tell from their faces that the process continues to be overwhelming for them. It is sometimes very difficult to explain a situation that may seem straightforward to me, but for them is still difficult to process. If we are to get this right, we need to understand that time and space are often needed for it to be done properly. That ties in with the importance of the written letter and the explanation that is given to victims in the aftermath of a conviction, a sentence or, indeed, an acquittal. I pay tribute to the groups in the victims in the aftermath of a conviction, a sentence or, to be done properly. That ties in with the importance of the written letter and the explanation that is given to victims in the aftermath of a conviction, a sentence or, indeed, an acquittal. I pay tribute to the groups in the

leave me, and I am sure that many other Members on both sides of the House will have had the same experience. I think that such experiences are particularly powerful when one is in the court environment, at the coalface, seeing them for oneself. That is why I think it so important for the Law Officers to continue to conduct cases in person so that they can really get a sense of what is going on and can understand and hold on to that vital of experience with the victims of crime.

The hon. Member for Ashfield (Gloria De Piero) understandably pressed us to proceed more speedily with the introduction of a victims law. She rightly said that we need to get the statutory duties right; we need to get them embedded, and we need to provide that systematic approach. We have committed in our strategy to consult upon the introduction of such a law, but it is not just about rights, important though they are; it is also about getting the statutory duties that have to underpin this absolutely right. Far too often, our experience here in this House—I think the hon. Member for Rotherham (Sarah Champion) might agree with me on this—is that we have gone ahead and passed legislation with the best of intentions, and then found that there has been a more than embarrassing, indeed a worrying, gap between the commencement of that legislation and its proper implementation. If we were to go down that road, we would fail victims badly, because we would raise expectations and then let them down. That is why we need to get this legislation absolutely right, but in the meantime we are not just sitting on our hands: we have published a strategy that commits to action here and now. Taking on board the constructive points the hon. Lady made, I think this is the best approach for victims and the interests of justice.

The hon. Lady asked a number of questions, and I will do my best to deal with as many of them as possible. The existing code has a statutory underpinning anyway, and the parliamentary ombudsman has a role in looking at and reporting on any maladministration, and we will of course, importantly, be looking at how to monitor future performance. The information that we can glean from the work of PCCs across the country about compliance with that code will help us to understand better where things are going wrong, and we expect that information to increase as the strategy is rolled out.

That will help inform the important process leading up to the introduction of legislation.

The hon. Lady made a point about the cross-examination of victims of sexual offences—what we might call the section 41 point, in reference to the measure in the Youth Justice and Criminal Evidence Act 1999 that introduced the restriction in question—and she mentioned the work of the former Solicitor General, now PCC for Northumbria, Dame Vera Baird, and the points made by other Members about this. We looked closely at the use of section 41 about a year ago, because we were very concerned about Dame Vera’s observations. We keep the matter under review, but we looked at about 300 cases and we found that, happily, evidence of the misuse or non-use of section 41 was sparing. In 92% of cases analysed by the CPS, we found no evidence of the improper use of sexual history in a way that would totally defeat the purposes of the legislation.

It is important, however, that we stamp out bad practice and that we train advocates and judges as fully as possible to put up the red light immediately when
inappropriate cross-examination is embarked upon, and I am glad to say that all criminal advocates and barristers are now getting training in dealing with sexual offences, in terms not just of cross-examination but of understanding fully the important procedures that have existed now for the better part of 20 years. Without being too anecdotal, I have had professional experience of prosecuting and defending in sexual cases both before and after section 41, and I remember the sea change that took place as a result of its introduction and how alert I certainly was, and other professionals were, to making sure that if applications were to be made that was done in writing before the trial, so that, importantly, complainants and victims were not taken by surprise, which is probably one of the worst things we can imagine: there someone is in court giving evidence about their statement when suddenly they find that wholly extraneous matters irrelevant to the issues in the case are being brought up. It must not happen.

Sarah Champion: I wonder whether the Minister will be kind enough to look into the evidence I have on child victims of sexual assault, because I think he might be quite shocked by the data I discovered.

The Solicitor General: I am grateful to the hon. Lady, and I would be very interested in that. Section 41 is widely framed; it involves not only adult complainants, and it embraces all types of sexual offence, not just rape, important though that is. I would be very interested to hear more about that evidence. She and I have worked together on many Bill Committees as Back Benchers, and I look forward to hearing more information from her.

Spousal rights were raised, as were the terrible circumstances in which someone might have murdered or tried unlawfully to kill their spouse. I understand that the hon. Member for Ashfield raised this point in Justice questions this week, and that the Under-Secretary of State for Justice, my hon. and learned Friend the Member for South East Cambridgeshire (Lucy Frazer), has undertaken to meet her to discuss it. I reiterate my hon. and learned Friend’s words, because the hon. Lady has raised this matter quite properly in the context of this debate. She also raised the issue of sentence changes to the maximum term for perpetrators of the offence of causing death by dangerous driving. We have committed to doing that as soon as parliamentary time allows. I know that the sense not just of closure, of face-to-face meetings with perpetrators, often in a prison setting, I know that the sense not just of closure, of face-to-face meetings with perpetrators, often in a prison setting, there are various scenarios where it works most powerfully.

The debate moved on in a helpful and important way when we heard the input from constituency Members. They referred to their own experiences in their constituencies, and echoed some of the analysis that we can see in the strategy. My hon. Friend the Member for Dudley South (Mike Wood) made those points very well in his speech. He reminded us of how far we have come in terms of changing the law to respond to the needs of modern crime—in particular, stalking and harassment. The hon. Member for Rotherham and I have worked on those issues in the past. I had the honour as a Minister of bringing into law the offence of coercive control, having campaigned for it as a Back Bencher. In the past year, we saw about 4,000 such cases, which equates to 4,000 victims of criminality who would not have had a voice two or three years ago. I constantly ask my local senior police officers about their experience of rolling out and using that new offence, and I am glad to say that there is an increasing understanding of its complexities.

Clare’s law was also mentioned. It is among the many key changes that the Government have introduced to safeguard and protect those who have either been the victims of crime or are at risk. I was particularly proud of our decision to place domestic homicide reviews on a statutory footing, bringing into force legislation that had been passed under the previous Government.

I have omitted to mention pre-trial counselling, to which the hon. Member for Rotherham and others have referred. There is a legitimate question about ensuring that the evidence of victims and witnesses is preserved and protected in a way that minimises the risk of its being undermined in cross-examination, but plenty of professionals out there have the training and understanding to know that. Where we have suitably qualified psychiatrists or other mental health professionals, there should in my view be no bar to the sort of general counselling help that would be of real value to people who are experiencing some form of trauma as a result of what has happened to them. With those safeguards, I am sure that more can be done to support victims, who often have to wait too long between the offence and the trial or the sentencing process.

The hon. Member for Paisley and Renfrewshire North (Gavin Newlands) drew our attention at length to the Scottish experience, as he is wont to do, and I make no criticism of him for that. He knows from previous answers that I have given to him and his colleagues that I am always alive to and interested in the Scottish experience. Indeed, history teaches us that many of the innovations brought in via the Scottish criminal justice system have been adapted here in England and Wales, and I see no reason for that to stop. That is why his contribution was particularly valuable today.

My hon. Friend the Member for Sutton and Cheam (Paul Scully) spoke with some force about his local experiences and the work being done by people such as the Donovans, who are an inspiration to many. His speech saw the welcome introduction of the theme of restorative justice, another issue in which I have taken a long and deep interest. Restorative justice must be victim led, and there are various scenarios where it works most powerfully.

Having spoken to victims who have availed themselves of face-to-face meetings with perpetrators, often in a prison setting, I know that the sense not just of closure, but of regaining control that victims can get is a powerful factor. I was glad that the coalition Government placed restorative justice on a firmer statutory footing in previous legislation, because we see it at all levels, particularly in youth offending, where it can be extremely powerful to bring a young offender face to face with their victim. As long as restorative justice is led by the victim—it is not a substitute for more appropriate action where necessary—then it is a valuable tool.

The hon. Member for Rotherham made an important speech that dealt in particular with the Criminal Injuries Compensation Authority. She knows that the Government
have committed to a review of the scheme; we have already committed to an important change to the “under the same roof” rule, which will be brought into force as soon as is practicable. She made other points about the position that people, particularly young people, will often be put into when it comes to consent.

The hon. Lady and I worked on theSerious Crime Act 2015 when it was in Committee, where we removed any suggestion that children were somehow impliedly consenting to sexual conduct when they were under the age of 16. If she remembers, we removed phrases such as “child prostitute” from the law. We tried in a constructive way to reset the clock when it comes to the protection of children, and let me be absolutely clear that victims who have been groomed should never be treated as if they consented. Let that message go out loud and clear to whoever needs to hear it. I am glad to say that the CICA has revised its staff guidance. That was done with engagement with the third sector, so I am interested to know of any instances where that concept of implied consent is somehow being reintroduced into the process when Parliament made it clear that it has no place in criminal law.

The hon. Lady also made other important points about unspent criminal convictions. Again, that issue must never be the subject of generalisation, and CICA claims officers should take into account the reasons for criminal behaviour when considering unspent convictions that do not result in a custodial sentence or community order. In other words, look at the person, not just the lines on a page. While it would be wrong of me to seek discretion when it comes to applications, but I have made such important points.

I get the point about time limits, and I have seen for myself the delay that understandably means that many victims of sexual offences will not come forward at the first opportunity. We are now light years away from the time when witnesses were asked such questions in court. People understand how difficult it is to come forward. We know that many victims often blame themselves for what happened, quite unfairly, and that this is about people doing things in their own time. Again, there is discretion when it comes to applications, but I have heard the point loud and clear today, and I am sure that that will help to inform the review.

My hon. Friend the Member for Walsall North (Eddie Hughes) rightly talked about the impact of domestic violence on children, who often witness it or even hear it in the home. We must not forget the effect of the sheer force of noise on young people. I am glad to note that courts up and down the country will treat that as a significant aggravating factor when it comes to sentencing perpetrators of domestic abuse. The scars might not be physical, but they remain for a long time, if not forever; in many cases.

The hon. Member for Lewisham, Deptford (Vicky Foxcroft) made some important points about cases of which she has had experience and, again, made the point that the need to improve practice now was imperative. Understandably, the debate has expanded somewhat from just the criminal justice process, but it is right to say that any victims legislation will apply to the victims of crime. That criminality can extend to major disasters, whether it is Grenfell or Hillsborough, and I am not going to prejudge the outcome of any proceedings, as they might well arguably be crimes themselves, although we will have to wait to see the outcome of any procedures. I take her point about the need for urgency, which is why the strategy does more than fill the gap. It brings together years of work and, importantly, looks to the future in a way that we can get to grips with now.

The hon. Member for Slough (Mr Dhesi) rightly reminded us of an aspect of the debate that we have not touched on today, which is to do with what I call hate crime. He quite properly reminded us of the appalling incident outside Parliament. He knows that I and others have supported the respect the turban campaign, and I have supported it in this place and in my local gurdwara in Swindon as well. He is right that we need to take these things seriously lest they take hold in a way that will reflect poorly on our society. Again, he mentioned stalking, harassment and sexual offences in that context. He was absolutely right to do that. He also mentioned the victim’s right of review and I can assure him that it already exists so when the CPS has a decision with which a particular complainant is not happy, they can ask for that to be reviewed. That is happening now, and in a number of important cases it is already there. Can I reassure him that although he then got on his soapbox a bit—and I am sure that he will forgive me for saying that—a lot of the recommendations made by the right hon. and learned Member for Holborn and St Pancras (Keir Starmer) and others are things that we have already done or that we are doing via the strategy? As DPP, the right hon. and learned Gentleman took through massive changes to the CPS that I believe resulted in a more efficient service that still delivers a very high degree of justice for thousands of people year in, year out.

The hon. Member for Oldham East and Saddleworth (Debbie Abrahams) brought her knowledge and experience to the debate. In particular, she talked about the victim personal statement, and in a moving way. I know that she did not intend to be moved in that way, but it moved us. More importantly, it informed us. The victim personal statement is a vital opportunity not just for the victim to have their voice but for the court to be able fully to understand the impact on them. That is why I am particularly enthused by the proposals to use bodyworn videos to capture not just what is said but the way in which it is said and the sense that the victim statement should be a living document.

At the moment, there are sometimes one, two or three versions of the VPS designed to update the court. Asking the victim to make a statement again and again is not necessarily the best way to support them, so the concept of a living VPS would really help. Again, I am pleased with the work done by the CPS to co-ordinate and synthesise the increased use of VPSs across the service—it has to increase. In particular, the Under-Secretary of State for Justice, my hon. Friend the Member for Charnwood, has dealt with his commitment and our commitment to review the Parole Board process, and the hon. Lady’s comments have considerably informed that debate. We are recruiting intermediaries, and Members have seen our commitment to that. We need to make sure that when we use intermediaries, they are genuinely for the purpose of assisting the victim to give their evidence. I have used them myself in cases and achieved
results that I would not have dreamt of without them, so I understand and get it. A major recruitment process is ongoing.

The hon. Member for Strangford (Jim Shannon) brought the experience of Northern Ireland as a welcome intervention into this debate. He talked about the wooden spoon, which, in rugby parlance, Ireland have won more than Wales. I do not think I had better dwell any further on his experience of corporal punishment. [Interruption.] The hon. Member for Paisley and Renfrewshire North mentioned Scotland, who are the doyenne of the wooden spoon, although they are getting better. I am talking about rugby union, Mr Deputy Speaker, which I know is a discipline you do not care for that much.

Mr Deputy Speaker (Sir Lindsay Hoyle): I only know the real game of rugby.

The Solicitor General: That is an entirely different debate. As you know, Mr Deputy Speaker, we have discussed it at length and heatedly in the past.

I am grateful to the hon. Member for Strangford for having carefully read the strategy and for helping to outline some of the important detail it contains. It is not just about warm words; it contains a lot of substance and, in particular, it outlines the use of best practice by a number of PCCs and other local services that we want to roll out further. The document is well written, accessible and can be read by a member of the public; it is written in “human being”, to coin my own phrase. That is why it is particularly valuable and important at this time.

The hon. Gentleman mentioned the new Minister for suicide prevention. I know she will want to work with both me and colleagues in the Ministry of Justice to make sure that we understand the position of victims. There have been some cases where, as a result of their experiences, we have lost them. A very important point was made.

The right hon. Member for Carshalton and Wallington (Tom Brake) raised the point about training. Frontline staff, whoever they are, need training, because they will often be involved in the victim’s only encounter with the criminal justice system. Every member of the team, be they a barrister, a legal executive or someone at the end of a phone, needs to understand the importance of our strategy, and how properly to support victims and witnesses. I have seen some really good practice in my experience both as a Member of Parliament and as a practitioner, and again this is echoed in the strategy.

In particular, the right hon. Gentleman asked about support for families bereaved by the tragedy of a homicide abroad. When a British person dies overseas, Foreign and Commonwealth Office staff are able to provide advice on how to repatriate their loved one and to support Her Majesty’s coroner if an inquest is heard in England or Wales. All consular officers receive mandatory training on how to support families bereaved overseas. We are currently completing a new homicide service, which will commence in April next year, so that families bereaved by homicides abroad will be entitled to the same support as those who are bereaved by homicide here in England and Wales. That is a vital commitment, and I am sure that the right hon. Gentleman will welcome it.

My civil servants worked overtime to prepare a draft speech for me, but because there has been so much substance in this debate, I have not needed it. I realise that all good things must come to an end, but, in all seriousness, this debate has been a very important part in the process of developing our strategy. I thank all right hon. and hon. Members for taking part, and I commend the victims strategy to the House.

Question put and agreed to.

Resolved,

That this House has considered the Victims Strategy.
**Rail Services into Liverpool Street Station**

*Motion made, and Question proposed. That this House do now adjourn.—(Jeremy Quin.)

4.14 pm

Mr Mark Francois (Rayleigh and Wickford) (Con): I asked for this Adjournment debate because my constituents are increasingly angry about the poor quality of service that they receive on the Abellio Greater Anglia-run line from Southend Victoria into Liverpool Street station. As the Minster is about to discover, after several years of dealing with this issue, I, too, am now angry on their behalf. I hope to demonstrate why Abellio provides such an unsatisfactory service to my constituents and suggest some ways forward.

Abellio Greater Anglia, which is part-Dutch and part-Japanese owned, has been providing the rail service on the Liverpool Street line for a number of years, and last year it won the competition to continue to run the franchise for another seven years. Unfortunately, it does not provide an efficient service. The latest data shows that more than one in every 10 Abellio trains arrives at its destination late, and the rolling stock is old, lacks air conditioning and suffers from a whole range of maintenance problems, meaning that trains are often cancelled or, at the very least, have carriages missing. Trains with carriages missing are often referred to in the industry as short trains. In simple terms, they normally have 12 carriages, but often, even in peak periods when capacity is most important, they are down to eight carriages, or even worse. That leads to overcrowding on the remaining carriages.

It is particularly galling for my constituents that for the past two years or so they have suffered regular disruption to their services on many weekends, and while travelling home late on certain weekday evenings, because of engineering works being carried out to renew overhead wires on the Liverpool Street to Southend line. On many weekends, bus replacement services have been required to help to transport commuters into London and back again, and the pattern has been repeated on weekday evenings. In addition, there is an unfortunate pattern of late trains being cancelled on weekday evenings. One evening a few weeks ago, when I was coming home late, I challenged one of the Abellio Greater Anglia customer service staff to explain why, yet again, a train had been cancelled. He said to me, "Sir, it’s because the company doesn’t want to pay the fines if the trains are late, so they prefer to cancel." The company’s management has contested this point with me, but if even the company’s own frontline staff believe that that is what is going on, what kind of message does that send to frustrated customers?

Despite the frequent disruption to the service, Abellio has consistently refused to give any discount to commuters to acknowledge the inconvenience that they have suffered when travelling on the line. As a result, a number of commuters have established a Facebook group called "I travel with Greater Anglia...". For the Minister’s edification, here is just a sample of a few comments that have appeared on the group in recent weeks. First, the

"07.23 Southend to LST turned up at Wickford with only 8 coaches. Did it lose some on the way given it wasn’t listed in the app or the board?"

Secondly:

"Surely this group should be called ‘I *TRY TO* travel with ‘Greater’ Anglia’?"

Thirdly:

"Thinking of changing the group’s name to ‘I travel with Greater Anglia rail replacement bus’ after today’s shower of a service."

Finally:

"After announcing a 12 coach service only 8 turn up. These muppets can’t even get the announcements right!"

Customer satisfaction surveys carried out by the consumer organisation Which? show that in 2017 Abellio Greater Anglia ranked 20th out of 28 for commuter service, with a score of 45%, compared with a top score of 64%, and for off-peak leisure services it ranked 18th out of 28, with a customer score of 55%, compared with a top score of 70%. These dismal scores clearly show that Abellio customers, particularly its commuters, are very unhappy with the service that they receive from Abellio Greater Anglia.

I had some experience of this service myself recently while travelling home in the evening peak. I had taken the tube from Westminster to Stratford station and when I got to Stratford, passengers were already six deep on the platform because the previous train had been cancelled. The next train that pulled in heading towards Southend was half empty and stopped at the platform because there was a red signal. When passengers attempted to board the train, they were stopped by Abellio platform staff who insisted that this was not a scheduled stop and therefore people should not be allowed to board. This led to a great deal of frustration on the platform—that is putting it politely—which I witnessed myself. Despite this, the train doors remained closed while the train sat on the platform for several minutes and then eventually pulled away still half empty and still with passengers six deep on the platform. There was a degree of Anglo Saxon language on the platform at this point, though I hasten to say not from me.

The next train to come in, which was some 20 minutes delayed, was already nearly full and therefore when passengers were allowed to get on this train—because this was a scheduled stop—they were packed like sardines for most of the way home. This one anecdote shows the lack of common sense that is applied by Abellio’s management to the running of their railway.

In fairness, new modern rolling stock is to be introduced on the line from summer 2019. However, brand new trains are useful to the customer only if they are able to leave the depot to run on the line. They are no good to anybody, despite air conditioning, wi-fi and all the bells and whistles, if they are still stuck in the depot, because, yet again, the line is closed off, because, yet again, there are engineering works and customers have to take buses instead.

I recently held a meeting at the Conservative party conference with the senior management of Abellio to discuss these issues—I have been discussing those issues with them for three years. At that meeting, they explained to me that the engineering works that have caused so much disruption and frustration were now due to be extended from the current end date of late 2019-early 2020 to May 2021. That is another three years on top of the two years that we have already had. I pleaded with the management at least to offer my commuters, who pay £5,000 for a standard class season ticket from Rayleigh to Liverpool Street and back, some discount when they renew their tickets in January to acknowledge all the inconvenience that they have had to endure. As I
put it to them, “Give them at least something back to show that you share their pain.” However, the company flatly refused to countenance that, partly, I believe, because it is high geared and has extremely ambitious financial targets to meet.

I have, therefore, become completely exasperated by the company. It is now running a glorified bus service loosely disguised as a railway and my constituents have absolutely had enough of it. I have to tell the Minister that I have now completely lost confidence in the management of Abellio Greater Anglia, which seems to regard my constituents as an entirely captive market who can be provided with a shoddy service while continuing to increase their fares year on year. I have, therefore, come to the reluctant conclusion that the management are incapable of running the company properly and I am calling on Mr Jamie Burles, the managing director of Abellio Greater Anglia, to resign. In fairness to myself, I did tell him at the Conservative party conference last week that I would do that, and it is probably fair to say that he was not best pleased. I believe that only with new and reinvigorated management will the company improve its performance and begin to respect its customers as it should have been doing in the first place.

I also—and I told him this too—intend to send a copy of the Hansard of this debate to each one of Abellio’s corporate managers on its corporate board in the Netherlands, so that they are aware of what English Members of Parliament think of their railway company.

This brings me to Network Rail, which runs the track and infrastructure on the Liverpool Street line. As a constituency MP, I have had many years’ experience of dealing with Network Rail and, indeed, Railtrack previously. I have often found Network Rail to be bureaucratic, very slow moving and unresponsive. Never is this more so than with the re-wiring project, which it now wants to extend to May 2021, thus taking nearly five years to replace the overhead wires for some 30 miles of track. This is an utterly pathetic performance and is simply unacceptable. We are not trying to build a railway through the Himalayas and we managed to put a man on the moon in 1969, so why does it take five years to run a new wire between a series of gantries above a railway line? I believe that Network Rail has simply not put anything like enough resource into this project. It has had no sense of urgency whatever, and has done it in a piecemeal and underinvested fashion. That is why it has taken so very, very long.

One of the great problems with Network Rail is that it is not customer facing. It is the train operating companies that levy the ticket prices. Network Rail thus has no need whatever to be responsive to the travelling public. The organisation is large, bloated, bureaucratic and inefficient, and is providing an extremely poor service to my constituents—not on our line. I must say that I have some sympathy for the Secretary of State for Transport, who, prior to the introduction of the new timetable, did exactly what I would have done as a Minister. He called a meeting of senior executives of the railway industry, including Network Rail. Having gathered them together, he asked them if everything was in good order for the launch of the new timetable in a few weeks’ time. Unfortunately, as I understand it, not one of those highly paid executives had the moral courage to put their hand up at that meeting and admit that there were going to be serious problems. They sat there and did not tell anyone. This complete lack of professionalism meant that the Department was led to believe that the new timetable would be introduced successfully. After all, it had brought the heads of the industry—or their senior executives—in and asked them, and no one had said anything to the contrary. How can anyone run an industry if it is controlled by people like that?

Partly as a result of that fiasco, the Government introduced the rail review, on which my right hon. Friend the Secretary of State for Transport made a statement earlier this afternoon. So in what I hope is a timely intervention, I would like the Rail Minister to regard my speech tonight as a submission to that review. I hope that I have been quick off the blocks.

For the avoidance of doubt, I do not believe that renationalising the railways is the answer. In the 1980s and 1990s, before I was a Member of Parliament, I often commuted on the Southend to London Fenchurch street line, which runs parallel to the Liverpool Street line. It was run by the old British Rail and was widely known as the misery line. The clue is in the name. It had appalling punctuality, extremely old slam-door trains and frequent cancellations of services. I remember one winter going down to Laindon station from which I used to commute at about 8 am to catch the 8.05. It was a dreary, wet, dripping British winter Monday morning and the passengers were about six deep on the platform, which told me straight away that something was up.

Over the tannoy came an announcement that I have always remembered. The announcer said, “British Rail wish to apologise to customers on platform 1 who are waiting for the 8.05 service to London Fenchurch Street. This has been cancelled due to a points failure in the Shoeburyness depot area.” A great sigh went up along the platform. Then the announcer said, “Once again British Rail wish to apologise.” Then he paused and said, “Look, it is a Monday morning and we’ve cocked it up as usual. For what it’s worth, I’m really sorry.”

There was a stunned silence on the platform, which was then followed by a large round of applause, because people could not think what else to do. That is my memory of the old British Rail, and I certainly do not want to go back to that.
To illustrate my point further, today the Fenchurch Street line, which is run by C2C, is one of the most successful and punctual lines in the country, with modern, comfortable, air-conditioned, wi-fi enabled trains. Renationalising the railways would put the network at the mercy of the Treasury every year, and I believe would lead to a lack of investment and inefficiency over time. Network Rail today shows us what a nationalised railway industry would be like, and as I think it is already a failure, I do not believe that nationalisation is the answer.

I think the better way would be to reunify train and track and recreate the old regional railway companies such as Great Eastern and Great Western, but crucially with both the trains and the rail infrastructure under one combined management as one company, so that the whole could be run as a properly integrated business. I believe that that would be far superior to the current unsatisfactory arrangements, in which lines of responsibility are unclear, everyone blames everyone else when something goes wrong, and there is obviously a clear lack of what the military would call command and control.

In summary, I am utterly exasperated about the lack of customer care from Abellio Greater Anglia, and I believe that the company needs new management and a fresh start. It must learn to respect its customers rather than treating them as cattle. I also remain highly critical of Network Rail, which I believe is highly bureaucratic and inefficient and is failing the travelling public. As a result, I believe Network Rail should be broken up and that train and track should be reunified in a series of regional railway companies as an outcome of the rail review. Other than that, I think everything is going swimmingly and I look forward with genuine interest on behalf of my constituents to the Minister's reply.

4.34 pm

The Minister of State, Department for Transport (Joseph Johnson): I congratulate my right hon. Friend the Member for Rayleigh and Wickford (Mr Francois) on securing the debate and giving us the opportunity to discuss train services into Liverpool Street. He has made a powerful and hard-hitting case on behalf of his constituents. It is a shame that there were not more people in the Chamber to hear it, but I know that he has a big social media following, not least from those of his constituents who are on the “I travel with Greater Anglia” Facebook page and its offshoots.

I would like to provide some information about the engineering works that have been taking place on the line to Southend, which, as we have heard, have clearly had a very negative impact on passengers in my right hon. Friend’s constituency. I will also touch on the important issues of fares and compensation, which he mentioned, and provide an update on the new trains that Greater Anglia has ordered and that are currently being built.

I recognise how important it is for my right hon. Friend’s constituents to have high-quality and reliable train services, so that they can get to work and go about their lives in a way that allows them to depend on the critical part of our national infrastructure that the railways represent. We are working closely as a Department with Network Rail and the train companies to drive down delays and cancellations, and we will support Network Rail and the wider industry in delivering significant improvements to the experience that passengers have of our railways.

The Department is following closely the significant upgrade project that Network Rail is currently delivering to replace the overhead line wire and equipment between Liverpool Street, Chelmsford and Southend Victoria. That, as my right hon. Friend knows, is a £46 million investment in our rail network. It started in 2014 and is due to be completed in 2020. It involves more than 500 structures being replaced and the installation of 128 km of overhead wire, and it is much needed. As he will know, the wiring system on his stretch of track was installed in the 1950s, nearly 70 years ago, and is in dire need of replacement. The current equipment is old, unreliable and prone to failure, and it is subject to sagging in hot temperatures. In recent years, there have been a number of highly disruptive de-wirements, as they are known, and more recently Network Rail has understandably had to impose speed restrictions in hot conditions as a result. Disruption caused by the failure of equipment leads to cancellations and delays, which impact the quality of service that passengers experience.

To minimise the overall time taken to complete that much-needed upgrade scheme, which would be a number of years longer if Network Rail only used weekends for the work, there have been some extensive periods of mid-week late evening blockades, with bus replacement services after 8.30 pm. Passenger numbers are generally lower during that period, as it is outside the conventional evening peak, so closing the line at that time helps to minimise overall passenger disruption.

I am aware that Greater Anglia has asked Network Rail to formally review its programme, to try to reduce the impact of that evening mid-week possession programme. It may be possible to focus the works more on weekends, but the decision on how best to manage that needs to be thought through carefully by both Network Rail and Greater Anglia. I understand that Network Rail and Greater Anglia are working together to get these works completed as soon as possible, with a view to having the works completed by early 2020 at the latest. In response to my right hon. Friend’s points, we expect Network Rail to commit enough resources to complete these works as soon as reasonably practicable. It has informed the Department that it now has a stretch target to complete the works by the end of 2019.

While negotiations for track access are ongoing, it is important to note that, whatever the outcome, the railway will only ever be closed for a set amount of time in total, and the question under discussion is largely one of how that time is spread out—the trade-off being greater passenger disruption if it is compressed.

Mr Francois: I thank my hon. Friend for his clear exposition. My constituents are not unreasonable people—they live in the real world. They know that the overhead work has to be done and that the infrastructure has to be upgraded. They accept that, but it is taking far too long. The evening possessions give Network Rail very little time on the track, so why not put far more resources in and put more men and women on the job during the weekend possessions and get it done quicker? That is what my constituents and I want.
Joseph Johnson: That is an entirely reasonable point of view. Network Rail has assured the Department that it is putting in the resources to get the job done as soon as is reasonably practicable, but on the back of the powerful points and the strong case my right hon. Friend has made on behalf of his constituents, I will write to Network Rail again to ensure that it is resourcing the project as it deserves.

I am aware that, as my right hon. Friend said, he has met Jamie Burles, the managing director of Greater Anglia, and asked that customers be given compensation in acknowledgement of the disruption that passengers have faced. I understand that Greater Anglia is now looking at whether there is a good-will gesture that might be practical, focusing in particular on those who have been affected by the adverse impact of the engineering works. Where customers are delayed outside the engineering works, Delay Repay compensation will of course apply as usual.

Officials from the Department are working with the operator, Greater Anglia, to see whether there is an affordable way to extend the compensation scheme so that it applies for a 15-minute delay rather than from the current 30-minute delay threshold. My right hon. Friend mentioned the Secretary of State’s statement earlier today, to which I am sure he listened carefully, in which the Secretary of State said that he wants Delay Repay 15 to be introduced in 2019—next year—on Greater Anglia. My right hon. Friend can take considerable credit for that development, and I hope that he will welcome it on behalf of his constituents.

The Government set the maximum amount by which regulated fares can rise. Train operators can choose to raise their fares by a lower amount, and there is no requirement for them always to use the maximum amount. We recognise the need to move away from RPI towards CPI, and the Secretary of State has written to the rail trade unions asking for their understanding and co-operation with this.

Mr Francois: What my hon. Friend says about the rate of fare increases is important. When I put precisely that point to Abellio, stating my understanding that, according to the RPI formula, the company can raise fares up to that limit but does not have to raise them to the limit if it does not want to, Abellio told me that, basically because of its contract and franchise agreement, it had no choice. I am not sure that is correct. Can my hon. Friend confirm that Abellio could levy a lower increase if it wanted?

Joseph Johnson: Yes, absolutely. I can confirm that the Government cap regulated fares, which account for about two thirds of fares on our railways, and it is up to the operator where to set fares below that cap.

The benefits of the franchise changes coming into place are part of a broad programme of benefits to franchises across the country. On the Greater Anglia network, the entire fleet of trains will be replaced by 2020, as my right hon. Friend mentioned, and an extensive programme of fleet refurbishment is under way. Greater Anglia has on order over 1,000 new carriages, and manufacturing and construction of the new carriages by Stadler and Bombardier in Derby is now well under way. The new state-of-the-art trains will provide many more seats that are much needed on those busy services, and the modern trains will also provide an improved travelling environment with wi-fi, air conditioning and power sockets. The new trains will be more efficient, have faster acceleration and provide better customer information.

Although those trains are coming down the line in the future, I am clear that the current performance of Network Rail and Greater Anglia needs to improve. I recognise the strong points made by my right hon. Friend about the instances of poor performance he has experienced and those that his constituents have relayed to him through casework and in conversations. There have been a number of regrettable infrastructure and train failures over the summer, but it is fair to say that performance has been better more recently. The public performance measure for Greater Anglia stands at 89.3% for the four-week period to 18 September, which is only fractionally below its franchise target of about 91.3% for that period. Clearly, there is room for improvement, and the Department will monitor its progress in meeting public performance targets over the coming weeks.

In conclusion, I again thank my right hon. Friend for the opportunity to discuss services to Liverpool Street, and I appreciate the frustration that he and his constituents have been experiencing. Once the works are complete, we expect performance to improve on that part of the network, resulting in fewer cancellations and delays.

Mr Francois: May I intervene one last time to thank the Minister for what I regard as a considered and thoughtful reply? He has clearly listened to what I was saying, and I am delighted that he will write to Network Rail about providing more resources. I would, of course, be fascinated to see a copy of the reply, which I hope can be managed. The Minister gets it. I am really pleased that he gets it, and I look forward to working with him to try to make this difficult situation better. I am grateful.

Joseph Johnson: I have little more to add other than that we will be following up this issue closely with Network Rail and the train operators to ensure that my right hon. Friend gets the experience that he wants for his constituents on this important stretch of our network.

Question put and agreed to.

4.47 pm

House adjourned.
Mr Barry Sheerman (Huddersfield) (Lab/Co-op): Is the Secretary of State aware of the neuro-diverse person who wants to become an entrepreneur and of the people with autism and the people on the autistic spectrum who want to get apprenticeships? Is it not a fact that the inability to get basic GCSE maths and English is a barrier to anyone getting an apprenticeship that will lead to entrepreneurship? What can she do to open up that pathway?

Ms McVey: The hon. Gentleman raises a good point: how do we support disabled people. As I have said, we are supporting more through Access to Work and through other support groups. We have also given easements to make it easier for disabled people, because it really is important that they do internships, apprenticeships, and work experience.

Alex Burghart (Brentwood and Ongar) (Con): One of the very best ways of helping disabled entrepreneurs, and indeed all disabled people who are looking for work, is to get them access to the best assistive technology that can help them when they are in the workplace and also give them confidence while they are looking for that work. What steps is the Secretary of State taking to ensure that disabled people have those opportunities?

Ms McVey: My hon. Friend is correct in what he says: we should be using technology even more. We should be making sure that it does assist disabled people. To that end, we are doing more through Access to Work and we should continue on that path.

Dr Paul Williams (Stockton South) (Lab): The disability employment gap in my constituency is, at 37%, higher than the national average. What message does the Secretary of State have for disabled people in my constituency who want to work and who are not getting the support that they need?

Ms McVey: The hon. Gentleman is correct: there is a big disability gap in employment rates. That has come down, but we need it to come down even further. We have pledged to get 1 million more disabled people into work by 2027. Between 2013 and 2017, there were 600,000 more disabled people in work, but there is always more that we can do.

Universal Credit Roll-out

2. Mr Alistair Carmichael (Orkney and Shetland) (LD): What assessment she has made of her Department’s preparedness for the roll-out of universal credit to people in receipt of working tax credits.

The Secretary of State for Work and Pensions (Ms Esther McVey): We are working closely with Her Majesty’s Revenue and Customs and stakeholders to ensure that our testing covers the full range of tax credit claimants. With parliamentary approval, our managed migration regulations will allow for transitional protection. This will make sure that nobody loses out financially when they are moved to universal credit.

Several hon. Members rose—
Mr Speaker: If only the right hon. Gentleman had known how popular he was.

Mr Carmichael: Yes, but for how long? One of the fundamental principles of universal credit was to design a welfare system where people would always choose to be in work. The money that the Chancellor took out in 2015 fundamentally undermined that principle, so will the Secretary of State speak to the current Chancellor about restoring work allowances to the levels originally planned?

Ms McVey: I am sure that the right hon. Gentleman will not be surprised to know that I have of course been having discussions with the Chancellor, and we will all know the result of those discussions two weeks to this very day.

Stephen Crabb (Preseli Pembrokeshire) (Con): Will my right hon. Friend take the time to listen to the voices of those on the frontline—the work coaches in the jobcentres, who have experience of how this policy functions in practice, who know what works and what does not work, and whose views about universal credit are overwhelmingly more positive than those of the Opposition critics?

Ms McVey: My right hon. Friend is correct to point out these facts. When we visit jobcentres, work coaches say that this is the best system that they have ever had to help people into work. We know the validity in that statement because 1,000 more people have been getting into work each and every day since 2010. We have to ensure that the system works for claimants and taxpayers.

Frank Field (Birkenhead) (Ind): May I raise the question about which I wrote to the Secretary of State, regarding how universal credit is being rolled out in Birkenhead? It is not going as well there as we are told it is in the House of Commons, and some women have taken to the red light district for the first time. Will the Secretary of State come to Birkenhead to meet women’s organisations?

Ms McVey: I thank my hon. Friend. I know that all Members of the House want to ensure that universal credit works for all claimants. It is helping people into work and is built on sound principles, unlike the legacy system, which trapped people and locked them into unemployment. Now we are helping people into work, but we have to listen, learn and adjust where we can, as we have done in the past, with a £1.5 billion package this year. We are still adjusting, learning and helping the most vulnerable.

19. [907054] Ruth George (High Peak) (Lab): The Secretary of State recently admitted that groups such as lone parents will be £2,400 a year worse off under universal credit. How is the Department going to support such lone parents when their transitional protection ends, as it very soon will?

Ms McVey: When we came into office in 2010—and then in 2015 and 2017—it was really important for the country to take difficult decisions about what we needed to do to ensure that the benefit was sustainable and affordable, because it had grown by over 60% under Labour. We still have to ensure that the benefit is sustainable and affordable, and that we support the most vulnerable, and that is what this Conservative Government are doing.

Nigel Mills (Amber Valley) (Con): When we move people over, it is vital that we get them on to the right amount of benefit at the right time, so will the Secretary of State agree to put in place some targets for accurate performance, and to delay the roll-out if those targets are not achieved?

Ms McVey: Under the process of managed migration, the roll-out will be slow and measured. It will start not in January 2019, but later in the year. For a further year we will be learning as we go with a small amount of people—maybe 10,000—to ensure that the system is right. The roll-out will then increase from 2020 onwards. It will be slow and measured, and we will adapt and change as we go.

Neil Gray (Airdrie and Shotts) (SNP): Has the Secretary of State requested any additional funds for universal credit from the Chancellor ahead of the Budget?

Ms McVey: I do not let people know what we do in private meetings, old-fashioned as that may be, but what the hon. Gentleman can know is that I am championing UC to make sure that it works the best it can possibly work. He can take from that what he will.

Neil Gray: That was barely a response, let alone an answer. Given the week that universal credit has had, where the Secretary of State has suggested that it will cost claimants up to £2,400 a year; two former Prime Ministers have called for her to rethink; dozens of Back-Bench MPs led by the former Secretary of State, the right hon. Member for Chingford and Woodford Green (Mr Duncan Smith), have called for a rethink; and expert groups like the Joseph Rowntree Foundation, the Resolution Foundation and the Child Poverty Action Group have all called for a rethink, does she not see that universal credit in its current form is causing misery? The roll-out must stop and the cuts must be reversed at the Budget.

Ms McVey: We all agree on the founding, sound principles of this benefit, which is helping more people into work. It will give extra money to the most vulnerable.
One million more disabled people will get, on average, £110 more a week. We will also be helping the 700,000 people who were not getting the correct amount of benefit, plus we will be bringing in transitional protection to help them. If the hon. Gentleman wanted to reverse this, what would he do for those most vulnerable people?

Sir Nicholas Soames (Mid Sussex) (Con): Will my right hon. Friend commend the work of the jobcentre in Haywards Heath, which I visited last Friday, for the extraordinarily effective, humane and decent way in which it is rolling out universal credit?

Ms McVey: I thank my right hon. Friend for that. Of course I want to thank not just Haywards Heath jobcentre but all the jobcentres across the country, who are saying that this is now enabling them, for the very first time, to help people into work. We know that that is the case, as we have record numbers of people getting into work—3.4 million more than in 2010.

Margaret Greenwood (Wirral West) (Lab): At the Conservative party conference, the Prime Minister announced that austerity is over. Only a few days later, it was reported in The Times that families who are required to transfer to universal credit could lose up to £2,400 a year. The Prime Minister then denied it, but the following day the Secretary of State admitted that in fact some people would lose out. The confusion of the past week will have caused real concerns for families who will be affected. They have a right to know. If austerity is really over, will the Government ensure that nobody loses out?

Ms McVey: As I have said both on TV and in the House, we took difficult decisions, as did the country, in 2015-16 because we had a benefits system that had grown by over 60% under Labour. Now it is on a sustainable footing and is fair to the taxpayer and fair to the claimant. One million more disabled people will be getting, on average, £110 more a month, and 700,000 who were not getting the right amount of benefit now will. There will be transitional protection. We are listening, we are learning, and we will adapt and change as need be.

Margaret Greenwood: Almost 30% of universal credit claims started are not completed, according to the latest figures, and the Government do not appear to have any idea about or interest in what happens to those people. In the next phase of the roll-out, the Government are placing all the responsibility for making a universal credit claim on to the 2.87 million people required to transfer to universal credit. There are some real dangers that hundreds of thousands of people could fall out of the social security system altogether and be pushed into poverty—even left at risk of destitution. So will the Government step back from the brink and stop the roll-out of universal credit?

Ms McVey: I have to say that that is some of the worst scaremongering I have ever heard. At the last Budget and this year, we put in another £1.5 billion when we knew that we had to provide more support. I announced in June that we would be helping another half a million disabled people on the severe disability premium. I have agreed to do more for kinship carers and the most vulnerable 18 to 21-year-olds. We are also agreeing to work with Citizens Advice—an independent and trusted organisation—to help people to get on to the benefit. When we hear what we need to do, we will do it.

Job Creation

3. Robert Courts (Witney) (Con): What estimate the Government have made of the number of jobs created in the UK since 2010. [907038]

20. Trudy Harrison (Copeland) (Con): What estimate the Government have made of the number of jobs created in the UK since 2010. [907055]

The Secretary of State for Work and Pensions (Ms Esther McVey): Employment in the UK has increased by more than 3.3 million since 2010 and is currently at a near record high of 32.4 million. Since 2010, the UK has created more jobs than France, Spain, Ireland, the Netherlands, Austria, Sweden and Norway combined.

Robert Courts: I thank the Secretary of State for that answer. What support are the Government offering to build on that employment success?

Ms McVey: That is precisely why we brought in universal credit, which made sure that people could work each hour they wanted to work and were not trapped by barriers to work, such as the 16-hour rule. We know that there are now 113 million more hours that people can work and that there will be more than 200,000 more jobs that people can go for.

Trudy Harrison: Nationally, youth unemployment is down. How will the Government ensure that it continues to fall, to give young people the best start to their working lives?

Ms McVey: I thank my hon. Friend for her question. I know how important youth employment is to her, and I know that she has visited her local jobcentre. She is quite right in saying that since 2010, youth unemployment is down by 48%. I remember when we brought in work experience, the Opposition were saying how awful it was and that it was slave labour and people did not want to do it—how wrong they were and have proved to be. We will be bringing more schemes forward, to make sure that we have record low unemployment for young people. That is what this party is about—youth and the future.

Ms Karen Buck (Westminster North) (Lab): The growth in jobs is very welcome news, but at the same time, we have to tackle the rise in in-work poverty. For the first time in modern history, there are more families in poverty in work than out of work. The benefit freeze is a key part of that, and there is another £1.9 billion to come off working-age benefits in April. Will the Secretary of State be making representations to the Treasury to ensure that that does not go ahead?

Ms McVey: As I said earlier, I will not say exactly what I have been saying in private conversations, but the hon. Lady can be sure that I will be championing our claimants and making sure that what we do is fair to claimants and the taxpayer.
Mr Speaker: Order. I apologise for barking at the hon. Member for Battersea (Marsha De Cordova). She has asked her question with considerable force and eloquence, but the Minister is entitled to reply. It is not for the Chair to take sides in these matters, but I do want to say that the Minister is unfailingly courteous and she must be treated with courtesy, whatever people think of the answer. The Minister must be heard.

Sarah Newton: Especially on such an incredibly sensitive subject as people wanting to take their own life. Our chief medical officer, Professor Gina Radford, has made it absolutely clear that the NHS data shows there is no causal link between applying for benefits and people tragically taking their lives.

Luke Pollard: Unlike the Health Secretary, a lot of people I represent get in touch with me about universal credit, and in particular about how they struggle to repay the loan given to them during the five-week wait period. If entitlement has already been established, will it come to his PIP assessment he was given a score of zero. It has been 18 months since then, his appeal has been adjourned three times through no fault of his own and still the DWP has not even applied for his full medical records. Will the Minister intervene to ensure that he can have a proper decision?

Sarah Newton: First, I remind the hon. Lady that it was the Labour party in 2008 that introduced the work capability assessment. Ever since then, we have been using independent advice to reform the work capability assessment.

Marsha De Cordova: It is shocking.

Sarah Newton: What is absolutely shocking is to misuse—[Interruption.]

Mr Speaker: Order.

Mr Speaker: I think my hon. Friend for her question. It is important that we put people at the centre of our processes and make sure that they work for everyone, irrespective of their impairments, and that is what we seek to do.

Luciana Berger: My constituent David Gamble has a number of degenerative conditions that are so serious that he was granted higher-rate mobility DLA indefinitely, but when

Sarah Newton: Something clearly has gone terribly wrong in that situation and of course I would be delighted to meet the hon. Lady.

Ms McVey: The hon. Gentleman will be pleased to know that the number of people on zero-hours contracts this year has dropped by 100,000, and full-time and permanent work accounts for 75% of employment. We are creating real jobs and real growth in this economy.

Contracted-out Health Assessments

4. Ruth Cadbury (Brentford and Isleworth) (Lab): What recent assessment she has made of the (a) accuracy and (b) efficiency of contracted-out health assessments for employment and support allowance and personal independence payment. [907039]

The Minister for Disabled People, Health and Work (Sarah Newton): Let us not forget that behind every statistic is a person. That is why I focus on the claimant satisfaction survey data. Overall the customer satisfaction rate is positive, with 87% for PIP and over 90% for the work capability assessment in ESA. We continually look at how we can improve accuracy in our processes.

Ruth Cadbury: Many of my disabled constituents are contacting me about their assessments for PIP and ESA. Of just two who contacted me about their health assessments, I identified 14 failures of due process—for just two cases. Given that 65% of appeals completed on the initial fit-for-work decisions were overturned and that the courts have consistently struck out DWP assessment decisions, does the Secretary of State not think that the money spent on defending those cases would have been better spent supporting disabled people?

Sarah Newton: I thank the hon. Lady for bringing up this issue, and she must be treated with courtesy, whatever people think of the answer. The Minister must be heard.

Sarah Newton: Especially on such an incredibly sensitive subject as people wanting to take their own life. Our chief medical officer, Professor Gina Radford, has made it absolutely clear that the NHS data shows there is no causal link between applying for benefits and people tragically taking their lives.

Transition to Universal Credit

5. Luke Pollard (Plymouth, Sutton and Devonport) (Lab/Co-op): What assessment she has made of the effect on the public purse of the five-week wait to transition to universal credit. [907040]

The Minister for Employment (Alok Sharma): Claimants are entitled to benefits from the moment of making a successful claim. The first payment under universal credit is made five weeks after the claim date, and all subsequent payments are made monthly thereafter. The five-week wait has no savings implications for the Exchequer.

Luke Pollard: Unlike the Health Secretary, a lot of people I represent get in touch with me about universal credit, and in particular about how they struggle to repay the loan given to them during the five-week wait period. If entitlement has already been established, will
the Minister consider, instead of issuing loans, giving them the money they deserve and are entitled to in the first place?

Alok Sharma: We talk about giving support to people and, as the Secretary of State pointed out, £1.5 billion of support was put in, so those who are on housing benefit get two weeks’ housing benefit run-on in actual cash and of course people can take advances. I would say this to the hon. Gentleman and all his colleagues sitting there now who are talking about supporting the vulnerable: if that is what they want to do, why did they not support us when we voted for the £1.5 billion?

Greg Hands (Chelsea and Fulham) (Con): One certain way in which universal credit is helping the public purse is by getting more people into work. Can my hon. Friend confirm that universal credit is forecast to help is by getting more people into work. Can my hon. Friend confirm that universal credit is forecast to help the public purse by getting more people into work. Can my hon. Friend confirm that universal credit is forecast to help

Alok Sharma: I can—200,000 people over the roll-out period. Not only that, but people will be taking on extra work as well.

Catherine West (Hornsey and Wood Green) (Lab): Astronomical numbers of people are applying to food banks during that critical five-week period. Has the Minister—yes or no—read the Trussell Trust report on universal credit roll-out?

Alok Sharma: I met the Trussell Trust last week and had a very constructive discussion. [Interruption.] I had a very constructive discussion. What I would say to the hon. Lady is that, when it comes to food banks, as she knows, the all-party group on hunger put out a very good report and said there were complex reasons for the use of food banks. You cannot put it down to any one reason.

Mr Philip Hollobone (Kettering) (Con): Five hundred and thirty households presently receive universal credit in the Kettering constituency, but with the roll-out this Wednesday up to 7,700 households could be affected. Can the Minister assure me and my constituents that Kettering jobcentre is ready for the change?

Alok Sharma: I go up and down the country to jobcentres, and they invariably tell me they are having a good experience. They are learning from the past. What I think my hon. Friend will find is that his jobcentre is absolutely prepared for this further roll-out.

Universal Credit: Blind and Partially Sighted People

6. Liz Twist (Blaydon) (Lab): What steps her Department has taken to ensure that claiming universal credit online is accessible to blind and partially sighted people.

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Work and Pensions (Guy Opperman): The online system has been designed with accessibility in mind, and it has been audited and approved by the Royal National Institute of Blind People for all accessibility needs. Face-to-face and telephone support are in place for those vulnerable claimants who cannot self-serve online.

Liz Twist: Many disabled people are already having problems claiming universal credit. With the regulations for managed migration expected shortly, the Disability Benefits Consortium fears that many people with disabilities will fall through the cracks and lose transitional protection. What steps is the Minister taking to ensure that people with physical or mental disabilities are given the specialist help they need to migrate, and should we not delay migration until that is sorted?

Guy Opperman: There is extensive engagement with the various organisations, and the Department is working hard to ensure there is full support for the disabled claimant, whether that is through the severe disability premium or our recently announced universal support fund.

Universal Credit: Scotland

7. Stephen Kerr (Stirling) (Con): What assessment she has made of the effectiveness of the advice and support offered to recipients of universal credit in Scotland.

The Minister for Employment (Alok Sharma): We have over 1,600 work coaches across 84 jobcentres in Scotland, who are trained to offer support and advice to claimants. As the Secretary of State pointed out earlier, we have a brand-new partnership with Citizens Advice Scotland.

Stephen Kerr: Citizens Advice’s Stirling district is a superb independent source of advice, having published a plain English guide to universal credit. Does the Minister agree that independent advice on benefits is essential and that ensuring it is provided without political point scoring from the Scottish Government and local government will serve claimants better?

Alok Sharma: I congratulate my hon. Friend, who is a great champion of his constituents, and he works very well with the local jobcentre. He is absolutely right: what Citizens Advice is providing is a huge amount of experience; it is an independent organisation with a national footprint. I absolutely agree that the last thing the vulnerable need is political point scoring. What they want is support, and that is what they are getting under universal credit.

Mr Paul Sweeney (Glasgow North East) (Lab/Co-op): What assessment has the Minister made of the closure of six jobcentres across Glasgow—

Chris Stephens (Glasgow South West) (SNP): Seven.

Mr Sweeney: Seven jobcentres in Glasgow. What assessment has he made of those closures as universal credit rolls out this month?

Alok Sharma: As the hon. Gentleman will know, we have reconfigured our estate. One of the reasons that has happened is that we had over-provision of space—20% more than we needed—and we now have jobcentres that are actually delivering. At the end of the day, one of the reasons for this is that we have much lower levels of unemployment than in 2010. I hope that is something the hon. Gentleman welcomes.
Alison Thewliss (Glasgow Central) (SNP): I recently held a drop-in surgery at the Kinning Park Complex in my constituency, because roll-out in Glasgow has already begun. The big issue that people raised was that they did not even know that this was going to affect them. There is a huge gap in awareness. What is the Minister going to do about this so that people actually get the benefits they are entitled to and do not lose out on transitional payments?

Alok Sharma: As I said, when I go to jobcentres, it is very clear to me that they are working extremely hard in engaging and in letting claimants know things ahead of time, and indeed in engaging with local Members of Parliament. I hope the hon. Lady has had a chance to visit her jobcentre. If she wants to have a detailed discussion about this, I am very happy to have a discussion with her after these oral questions.

Universal Credit: Household Debt

8. Alex Cunningham (Stockton North) (Lab): What assessment her Department has made of recent trends in the average level of household debt for people in receipt of universal credit.

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Work and Pensions (Justin Tomlinson) rose—

Mr Speaker: I congratulate the hon. Gentleman on his wedding, and we look forward to his reply.

Justin Tomlinson: A truly memorable day.

Alongside the personalised and tailored support of universal credit, claimants have access to extended childcare support, increases in the personal tax allowance and the introduction of the national living wage. For those transferring from legacy benefits, there is an additional two weeks of housing benefit support.

Alex Cunningham: It is all too easy for people to fall into debt with universal credit failures. My constituent Kayley Aithwaite gets paid on the last working day of her wedding, and we look forward to his reply. [Interruption.] I call James Cartlidge.

James Cartlidge (South Suffolk) (Con): What steps will the Minister take to ensure that my disabled constituents do not have to wait months on end without benefits for their court appeals?

Justin Tomlinson: This is an issue that has been raised and that is why additional judges have been recruited to the tribunal system to make sure that goes as quickly as possible. Through their individual work coach, people will get the tailored support as quickly as they can.

Mr Speaker: I thought we might hear from the voice of South Suffolk, but the hon. Gentleman seems disinclined to participate in this exchange even though he has a comparable question. He is not obliged. If he is more interested in his phone, so be it. [Interruption.] Get in there, man. I call James Cartlidge.

Mike Amesbury (Weaver Vale) (Lab): From July 2019, up to 2.8 million people will be required to move from their existing benefits by making a new claim for universal credit. Many are set to lose up to £200 a month. The Trussell Trust, the Child Poverty Action Group, Disability Rights UK, two former Prime Ministers, the future Chancellor and even the Archbishop of Canterbury have all called for a halt to this process, which is driving the growth of poverty in our communities. At what stage will the Secretary of State take her fingers out of her ears, listen to reality and halt this chaos?

Justin Tomlinson: I thank the hon. Friend for his comments. That is absolutely key: with universal credit you will always be better off in work. UC removes the effective 90% tax rate of the legacy benefit and the cliff-edges of 16, 24 and 30 hours. It is a far simpler benefit, which is stopping the £2.4 billion-worth of benefits that were missed in claiming.

Universal Credit

9. Stephen McPartland (Stevenage) (Con): What steps the Government have taken to improve universal credit since autumn 2017.

The Secretary of State for Work and Pensions (Ms Esther McVey): We are constantly improving universal credit in response to feedback and have implemented a wide-ranging package of improvements worth £1.5 billion, some of which my hon. Friend campaigned for. We will continue to do that when we need to.
Stephen McPartland: Universal credit can work only if it is fully funded. Does my right hon. Friend agree that the effective tax rate of 63p in the pound for people moving into work is set at a punitive level and that the Treasury should loosen the purse strings for her?

Ms McVey: My hon. Friend is always a good campaigner on these causes and we of course meet to discuss these matters. At the moment, the taper rate is 63%, as he says, but it was over 90% under the legacy system. We have dropped it considerably and when we can, when the economy is on a sounder footing, we will seek to drop it even further to make sure that work pays, which is something this Conservative Government do.

Alison McGovern (Wirral South) (Lab): The Secretary of State says that universal credit is constantly improving, but unfortunately the number of people coming to my office for food bank vouchers is constantly increasing. More and more of the people coming are families with kids. The public are angry. Has the Secretary of State made an assessment of how many families using food bank vouchers are lone parents with children?

Ms McVey: The hon. Lady raises a good question about what happened under the previous Labour Government.—[Interruption.] Can I just put this on the record, Mr Speaker? Under the previous Labour Government—[Interruption.] Labour Members are huffing, puffing, tutting and shaking their heads, but the number of households where no one had ever worked doubled under Labour. That is where the problem started and we are changing that. It has been a quick change—to 3.4 million people in work—and we have to help those who go to food banks and what sort of help they need, including DWP people in their food banks?

Mr Speaker: I call Richard Graham. Why is he surprised by that? He is standing. Get in there.

Richard Graham (Gloucester) (Con): The Secretary of State knows that one of the difficulties with trying to correlate the people on universal credit with those who go to food banks is that there is no precise data to compare the two. I know anecdotally that the number of foreigners claiming food bank vouchers is quite high. Is there a state at which we can, with the Trussell Trust, arrange to have data that tells us much more about who is going to food banks and what sort of help they need, including DWP people in their food banks?

Ms McVey: Of course we have to understand the underlying issues and problems and support people as best we can. I met the Trussell Trust and various poverty groups and we have talked about how we best support families. We believe that the best way to support a family out of poverty is by getting them into work—hence why I pointed out that, under the previous Labour Government, the number of households where no one ever worked doubled. This Government believe that work is the best way out of poverty and we will continue helping people.

Debbie Abrahams (Oldham East and Saddleworth) (Lab): One million householders, 750,000 disabled people, 600,000 working single parents, 600,000 self-employed people and 300,000 families with three or more children will all be worse off under universal credit. Will the Secretary of State finally admit that, for these people, austerity is far from over?

Ms McVey: I have said that, under this benefit, what we sought to do was get more people into work, because that is the best way out of poverty, and that is what we have done. We are helping 1,000 people each and every day into work. We also said that we would make this benefit fair to the taxpayers, who are paying for it, and fair to those claimants, and that is what we are doing.

Benefits System: Claimants’ Needs

10. Lee Rowley (North East Derbyshire) (Con): What steps the Government are taking to ensure that the benefits system is able to meet the changing needs of claimants.

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Work and Pensions (Justin Tomlinson): This Government are delivering the biggest changes to the welfare system since its inception, creating flexibility to adapt to changing working patterns and offering personalised support.

Lee Rowley: I thank the Minister for his response. An increasing number of people in my constituency are self-employed and setting up their own businesses. Will the Minister outline what universal credit is doing to support people who are setting up their own businesses?

Justin Tomlinson: I thank my hon. Friend, who is a real champion of the self-employed community, and I am proudly a former business owner myself. Universal credit is far more flexible to adapt to changing circumstances, particularly for those who are starting up on their career of owning their business.

Work: People with Disabilities

11. Andrew Jones (Harrogate and Knaresborough) (Con): What steps the Government are taking to help people with disabilities into work.

The Minister for Disabled People, Health and Work (Sarah Newton): We support disabled people into work through a wide range of initiatives, including our £500 million Work and Health Programme and the £330 million personal support package, and Access to Work supported over 25,000 people last year. I had meetings all through the summer with our Work and Health Programme providers, including Reed in Partnership
in Yorkshire, and I saw fantastic work being done to take a health and wellbeing approach to enable people back into work.

Andrew Jones: Many employers have signed up to the Disability Confident scheme—as I have—to ensure that disabled people have the opportunity to achieve their ambitions and employers can choose from a wider selection of talent available. I am now encouraging businesses in Harrogate and Knaresborough to sign up. Will the Minister join me in encouraging employers right across our country to sign up to this impressive initiative?

Sarah Newton: I thank my hon. Friend for his question and for his fantastic leadership in his constituency. I am delighted to say that hundreds of employers are signing up every week to the Disability Confident scheme, with more than 8,300 having signed up in total, including well over 800 in his own constituency. Many Members have taken up the community challenge, and it is not too late for those who have not participated. I encourage everyone to help people to sign up to be disability confident.

Lucy Powell (Manchester Central) (Lab/Co-op) rose—

Mr Speaker: The hon. Lady has what might be called the Oral-B approach to getting called, which is to offer the House a beaming smile.

Lucy Powell: Thank you very much, Mr Speaker, but I am afraid that I am not smiling about the Minister’s replies, because they are so far detached from the reality that many of us are seeing on the frontline. She will know that those facing a change in circumstance are not protected by the transitional protections. This is affecting dozens of disabled constituents of mine, such as Dean, who has lost £300 a month, having lost his disabled premium going from tax credits to universal credit, and Erica, who has now built up £5,000 of overpayments due to the same thing. The principles of universal credit are now in tatters—it is not helping people to work. When will the Government review this?

Sarah Newton: I am afraid that the hon. Lady is completely wrong. We have put in place transitional protection for people on the severe disability premium; under our new regulations, that protection is now there.

Pensions Dashboard

12. David Warburton (Somerston and Frome) (Con): What steps the Government have taken to enable industry to deliver the pensions dashboard. [907047]

14. Nigel Huddleston (Mid Worcestershire) (Con): What steps the Government have taken to enable industry to deliver the pensions dashboard. [907049]

16. Mike Wood (Dudley South) (Con): What steps the Government have taken to enable industry to deliver the pensions dashboard. [907051]

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Work and Pensions (Guy Opperman): An industry-led pensions dashboard, facilitated by Government, will harness industry innovation and provide an opportunity for the pensions industry to step up and take a leading role. We have engaged with the industry and are assessing the feasibility of a dashboard. We will report shortly on the findings.

David Warburton: Ten thousand of my constituents have been automatically enrolled on the pensions dashboard under this Government. Will the Minister confirm that this is one of many options for my constituents for receiving pensions information, and that the dashboard will remain firmly in place?

Guy Opperman: My hon. Friend is right. The dashboard will transform how his constituents keep track of their growing number of pensions. This, along with the Single Financial Guidance Body, which the Government set up last year, will provide free and impartial information and guidance to help people plan for their retirement.

Nigel Huddleston: Will the Minister explain how the development of this online system will benefit my constituents?

Guy Opperman: Some 15,000 people in my hon. Friend’s constituency have been auto-enrolled thanks to the 2,010 employers supporting the system. As auto-enrolment expands, there will be a number of different pension pots, and having an online tool that everybody can access will be a massive addition for his constituents.

Mr Speaker: If the Minister could be good enough to face the House, it would be hugely appreciated.

Mike Wood: Does the Minister agree that for the pension dashboard to be effective, it must be comprehensive, which means enjoying support right across the sector? If so, what is he doing to achieve this?

Guy Opperman: It was a pleasure to visit my hon. Friend’s constituency in the summer and to meet many of the 10,000-plus people there who are auto-enrolled. We are in daily contact with industry figures as we engage with the industry and are assessing the feasibility of a pensions dashboard, designed to help workers know what they have saved and what they have to save to
ensure a decent income in retirement, and all easily accessible in one place. Will the Minister now ensure an obligation on providers to supply the necessary information to the pensions dashboard, and can we be confident that the Secretary of State, whose capacity to get it wrong knows no bounds, will not make a renewed attempt to thwart the pensions dashboard?

**Guy Opperman:** Is it not rich that the Labour party, which never came up with or implemented a pensions dashboard, is criticising us, who are doing exactly that? Let me make it acutely clear that this is a party that works together, and that my right hon. Friend the Secretary of State and I, and all the members of the DWP team, are completely behind the pensions dashboard.

**Universal Credit Roll-out**

13. **Andrew Bowie (West Aberdeenshire and Kincardine) (Con):** What progress she has made on the roll-out of universal credit throughout the UK.

**The Minister for Employment (Alok Sharma):** Universal credit is now live in 495 jobcentres available to new claimants, and within weeks it will be available throughout the country.

**Andrew Bowie:** In two weeks’ time the remaining two thirds of my constituency will receive universal credit, following the one third who have already received it. Notwithstanding the frankly irresponsible narrative that we hear from Opposition Members, the work and pensions staff in the Aberdeen jobcentre cannot wait to get started and to deliver this transformative benefit. Can the Minister confirm that it is on track to be rolled out in two weeks’ time?

**Alok Sharma:** I thank my hon. Friend for engaging with his local jobcentre, which is not always done by Opposition Members. I hear the same thing from other jobcentre staff across the country. Universal credit is working, and I say to the Opposition, “Stop scaremongering: you are not helping the people who are working, and I say to the Opposition, “Stop scaremongering: you are not helping the people who are working.”

**Caroline Flint (Don Valley) (Lab):** As universal credit is rolled out, the Government have announced that they are removing local authority funding support for claimants and placing the role solely with Citizens Advice. When will Doncaster Citizens Advice, and all the other branches in the country, know for sure exactly what resources they will receive, and when?

**Alok Sharma:** Let me be clear. Local authorities will continue to provide that support until the end of the current financial year, and will work in parallel with Citizens Advice, which is starting its work in the autumn.

### Topical Questions

**Mr Speaker:** We now come to topical questions. Brevity is of the essence.

T1. **Kevin Hollinrake (Thirsk and Malton) (Con):** If she will make a statement on her departmental responsibilities.

The Secretary of State for Work and Pensions (Ms Esther McVey): When we were here last, Members in all parts of the House were asking whether Citizens Advice could be more involved with universal credit. I am pleased to inform them today that I went away and secured that agreement, and that Citizens Advice, as an independent organisation, will be giving universal support and assisting claimants with universal credit.

**Kevin Hollinrake:** Universal credit was introduced in my constituency early in 2017. Although there were initial problems following the changes made by the Government at the end of last year, Citizens Advice has reported a significant reduction in the number of difficulties. Jobcentre Plus staff also report a very positive effect in getting people back to work. Does that endorse the principle that we should seek not to reject universal credit, but to reform it?

**Ms McVey:** My hon. Friend is right. Work coaches are saying that this is the best system that they have ever had. It has been helping 1,000 people into work each and every day since 2010. My hon. Friend is also right to say that when we see that things need to be improved and adapted, we listen, we learn, and we change it as it goes.

**Marsha De Cordova (Battersea) (Lab):** Under universal credit, severely disabled people will lose out on disability premiums worth up to £80 per week, and will also lose the £30 “limited capability for work” component. Last week, the Secretary of State said that 1 million disabled people would be “significantly better off” under universal credit. Let me ask her now whether that is really the case. Is not the reality that after the premiums and the £30 component have been scrapped, disabled people will in fact be worse off overall under universal credit?

**The Minister for Employment (Alok Sharma):** The Secretary of State has made it absolutely clear that we will be protecting people who currently receive the severe disability premium. If interruption. Will the hon. Lady just listen? A million disabled households who are now receiving legacy benefits will gain, on average, £110 a month on universal credit. Those are the facts, and the hon. Lady should try to accept them.

T2. **Eddie Hughes (Walsall North) (Con):** The roll-out of universal credit will come to Willenhall in my constituency on Wednesday. Will the Minister join me in endorsing the work of Walsall Housing Group and its Rent First programme, which is helping tenants to prepare for that transition?

**The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Work and Pensions (Justin Tomlinson):** I know that my hon. Friend has great experience in this area, and I should be very excited to hear about those proposals in more detail. I am keen to meet him to establish whether any lessons can be learned.

T4. **Stephen Lloyd (Eastbourne) (LD):** Shortly after the 2015 general election, the then Chancellor removed £3 billion per annum from universal credit. That would never have been allowed to happen had the Liberals still been in government. Members of all
parties in the House have urged the Secretary of State to urge the Chancellor to replace the £3 billion work allowance so that work really does pay; will she do so?

Alok Sharma: It is absolutely clear that under universal credit work is paying. That is why we have over 3 million more people in jobs than in 2010.

T5. [907065] Mike Wood (Dudley South) (Con): I welcome the announcement that Citizens Advice will be providing universal support in Dudley South and across the country. Can the Minister explain how this will benefit my constituents, and particularly their timely access to universal credit?

Alok Sharma: Through Citizens Advice, which we are rolling out across the country, it will be possible particularly for the most vulnerable to get support in terms of budgeting help and also digital support.

T3. [907063] Chris Williamson (Derby North) (Lab): We have heard a lot of warm words from the Secretary of State and Members on the Government Benches about universal credit, but I was recently approached by a constituent who has had to give up a well-paid job because of severe anxiety and depression and who, after the wait for universal credit, is going to be £400 a month worse off, so will the Secretary of State disown the Prime Minister’s assertion that austerity is over, because it certainly isn’t for people on universal credit?

Alok Sharma: We have been absolutely clear that there are going to be protections in place for those currently on legacy benefits as we move across to universal credit. I do wish the Opposition would stop scaring people from moving on to universal credit.

T7. [907067] Michael Tomlinson (Mid Dorset and North Poole) (Con): I welcome the announcement that the Department is providing work experience, and working with Barnardo’s to provide work experience, for care leavers. What further support is my hon. Friend offering to care leavers to ensure they fulfil their potential?

Alok Sharma: This is a real priority for our Secretary of State and it will involve building on our work to enable care leavers to make advanced UC claims, access to the youth application support programme, early access to the Work and Health programme and extensions to second chance learning, and we will work with employers to create more opportunities to build on this partnership with Barnardo’s.1

T6. [907066] Bill Grant (Ayr, Carrick and Cumnock) (Con): I had a constituent with severe learning impairment who, being unable to read the letters she received about the transition to PIP, had her DLA payments suspended. How can the Secretary of State justify a managed migration for disabled people when the Government cannot even get the basics right of communicating with people?

The Minister for Disabled People, Health and Work (Sarah Newton): I advise the hon. Gentleman’s constituents to use the telephone service or for one of their friends or family members to call up, because it is absolutely essential that people who have any sort of disability that prevents them from accessing their benefit have those barriers overcome: so pick up the phone and the support will be available.

T9. [907069] Andrew Bowie (West Aberdeenshire and Kincardine) (Con): How many people in West Aberdeenshire and Kincardine have benefited from automatic enrolment thus far?

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Work and Pensions (Guy Opperman): Some 10,000 of my hon. Friend’s constituents are benefiting from automatic enrolment, with thanks to the 1,800 employers involved, and nationally workplace pension provision for women and young people has now doubled in the last five years.

T8. [907068] Stephen Timms (East Ham) (Lab): Ministers defend the five-week wait for universal credit on the basis that employees will have had a month’s pay in their bank account when they left their previous job. Does the Minister accept that that case simply does not apply to employees paid weekly or those on zero-hours contracts?

Alok Sharma: I have huge respect for the right hon. Gentleman, as he knows, but that is precisely why we introduced this £1.5 billion of support earlier this year, which means people can get advances up front—up to 100%—and those on housing benefit get a two-week run-on, which is money that does not have to be repaid.

Philip Davies (Shipley) (Con): I recently hosted a Disability Confident event in Baildon in my constituency. As somebody who employs somebody with multiple disabilities, I know that many workforces are losing out on a huge pool of talent. May I therefore urge the Minister to advertise the benefits of Access to Work more widely so we can get even more disabled people into work?

Sarah Newton: I congratulate my hon. Friend on his personal leadership in his constituency and for employing a disabled person and drawing on all the talents that our nation has to offer. Access to Work is a fantastic scheme helping record numbers of people and we will continue to do everything we can to make sure disabled people can work.

Grahame Morris (Easington) (Lab): My constituent Paul is agoraphobic and has a personality disorder, heart damage and a history of self-harm. After a tribunal accepted that he could not attend an assessment centre, the centre for health and disability assessment has blocked his employment and support allowance and universal credit by refusing him a home assessment. Will the Minister apply some common sense and overrule the decision?

Sarah Newton: The hon. Gentleman raises a serious point. Home assessments are of course an important part of our processes. I am very disappointed to hear about that case, which I will be happy to look into.
helping vulnerable claimants back into work. Will my right hon. Friend consider what further support might be useful to jobcentres in hosting future employment fairs across the United Kingdom?

Ms McVey: I thank my hon. Friend for raising that point. I visited his constituency over the summer to see what terrific work his work coaches were doing. We will be implementing more work in outreach and developing our flexible fund to help more people.

Liam Byrne (Birmingham, Hodge Hill) (Lab): Birmingham’s food banks have had their busiest year ever—70% of their demand is due to universal credit. Can I give the Secretary of State a choice? Either pause this crazy roll-out or come to Birmingham and help us to raise the tonne and a half of food we need each month to replenish the empty food bank stock.

Alok Sharma: We have had this discussion in a number of questions now. Can I be absolutely clear? The right hon. Gentleman should look at the report produced by the all-party parliamentary group on hunger, which said that the reasons for food bank usage are complex and myriad, and cannot be put down to any single reason.

Kate Green (Stretford and Urmston) (Lab): Under managed migration, claimants of legacy benefits will effectively have to apply anew for universal credit, and some vulnerable claimants may not realise and lose transitional protection as a result. Will the Minister look again at how those claimants can ensure that they retain their transitional protection?

Alok Sharma: The Secretary of State, other Ministers and I are having detailed engagement with the various health groups that the hon. Lady is talking about. We are, of course, looking at the recommendations made by the Social Security Advisory Committee.

Paul Masterton (East Renfrewshire) (Con): I warmly welcome the announcement by the Under-Secretary of State, my hon. Friend the Member for Hexham (Guy Opperman), of a consultation on collective defined contribution schemes. However, I had anticipated that it would come out before my ten-minute rule Bill on Wednesday. Will he give us an update as to when we might see it?

Guy Opperman: I am delighted that my hon. Friend has raised this point. The consultation will be of assistance to Royal Mail and the thousands of posties in his constituency. We will be consulting on the matter very shortly.

Sarah Newton: My hon. Friend is an absolute champion for all her constituents, but particularly those with disabilities and health conditions who want to work. I really welcome her setting up of this jobs fair in her constituency on Friday and encourage as many local people as possible to sign up to Disability Confident.

Chris Elmore (Ogmore) (Lab): One of the concerns being expressed by constituents about the universal credit roll-out is literacy levels and people’s unwillingness and fear about being able to complete forms. Given that universal credit is to be fully rolled out in my constituency in December, what assurance can the Minister give me that those with poor literacy levels with receive the support they need to get the benefits that they need and deserve?

Alok Sharma: Universal support has been available since 2017, but our partnership with Citizens Advice is clearly a step up. I hope that that will make a positive difference to the hon. Gentleman’s constituents.
EU Exit Negotiations

3.33 pm

The Prime Minister (Mrs Theresa May): With permission, Mr Speaker, I would like to update the House ahead of this week’s European Council.

We are entering the final stages of these negotiations. This is the time for cool, calm heads to prevail, and for a clear-eyed focus on the few remaining but critical issues that are still to be agreed. Yesterday, the Secretary of State for Exiting the European Union went to Brussels for further talks with Michel Barnier. There has inevitably been a great deal of inaccurate speculation, so I want to set out clearly for the House the facts as they stand.

First, we have made real progress in recent weeks on both the withdrawal agreement and the political declaration on our future relationship. I want to pay tribute to both negotiating teams for the many, many hours of hard work that have got us to this point. In March, we agreed legal text around the implementation period, citizen’s rights and the financial settlement, and we have now made good progress on text concerning the majority of the outstanding issues. Taken together, the shape of the deal across the vast majority of the withdrawal agreement—the terms of our exit—is now clear. We also have broad agreement on the structure and scope of the framework for our future relationship, with progress on issues such as security, transport and services.

Perhaps most significantly, we have made progress on Northern Ireland, on which the EU has been working with us to respond to the very real concerns we had about its original proposals. Let me remind the House why this is so important. Both the UK and the EU share a profound responsibility to ensure the preservation of the Belfast/Good Friday agreement, protecting the hard-won peace and stability in Northern Ireland and ensuring that life continues essentially as it does now. We agree that our future economic partnership should provide for solutions to the unique circumstances in Northern Ireland in the long term, and while we are both committed to ensuring that this future relationship is in place by the end of the implementation period, we accept that there is a chance that there may be a gap between the two. This is what creates the need for a backstop to ensure that if such a temporary gap were ever to arise, there would be no hard border between Northern Ireland and Ireland, or indeed anything that would threaten the integrity of our precious Union.

This backstop is intended to be an insurance policy for the people of Northern Ireland and Ireland. Previously, the European Union had proposed a backstop that would see Northern Ireland carved off in the EU’s customs territory, which states: “It shall be unlawful for Her Majesty’s Government to enter into arrangements under which Northern Ireland forms part of a separate customs territory to Great Britain.”

Secondly, I need to be able to look the British people in the eye and say that this backstop is a temporary solution. People are rightly concerned that what is only meant to be temporary could become a permanent limbo, with no new relationship between the UK and the EU ever agreed. I am clear that we are not going to be trapped permanently in a single customs territory unable to do meaningful trade deals. So it must be the case, first, that the backstop should not need to come into force: secondly, that if it does, it must be temporary; and, thirdly, while I do not believe that this will be the case, that if the EU were not to co-operate on our future relationship, we must be able to ensure that we cannot be kept in this backstop arrangement indefinitely. I would not expect the House to agree to a deal unless we have the reassurance that the UK, as a sovereign nation, has this say over our arrangements with the EU.

I do not believe that the UK and the EU are far apart. We both agree that article 50 cannot provide a legal base for a permanent relationship, and we both agree that the backstop must be temporary, so we must now work together to give effect to that agreement.

So much of the negotiations is necessarily technical, but the reason why this all matters is that it affects the future of our country. It affects jobs and livelihoods in every community. It is about what kind of country we are and about our faith in our democracy. Of course it is frustrating that almost all the remaining points of disagreement are focused on how we manage a scenario that both sides hope should never come to pass and that, if it does, will only be temporary. We cannot let that disagreement derail the prospects of a good deal and leave us with the no-deal outcome that no-one wants. I continue to believe that a negotiated deal is the best outcome for the UK and for the European Union. I continue to believe that such a deal is achievable, and that is the spirit in which I will continue to work with our European partners. I commend this statement to the House.

3.40 pm

Jeremy Corbyn (Islington North) (Lab): I thank the Prime Minister for an advance copy of her statement.
This really is beginning to feel like groundhog day—another “nothing has changed” moment from this shambles of a Government. Almost two and a half years after the referendum, 18 months since the triggering of article 50 and with less than six months to go, what do we have to show for all that? Yesterday we saw another Brexit Minister shuttling over to Brussels only to come back, tail between his legs, unable to deliver because of divisions in the Conservative party. Over—[Interruption.]

Mr Speaker: Order. I appealed earlier for calm and I do so again. I will reiterate what people should know anyway by now: there will be ample opportunity for everybody who wants to ask a question—not to shriek across the Chamber, but to ask a question—to do so. Let us have a bit of hush on both sides of the House.

Jeremy Corbyn: Over the past 18 months, red line after red line has been surrendered. Even the Prime Minister’s much-vaunted Chequers plan now appears to be dead in the water. In fact, after countless resignations and the threat of even more, she could not even bring herself to mention Chequers in her own conference speech. The Prime Minister must stop the excuses. There is a Brexit deal that could command the support of Parliament and the country—a Brexit deal that would benefit Britain and allow us to rebuild our communities, regions and economy, and avoid any hard border in Northern Ireland—but that is not her deal.

As we reach a critical point in this nation’s history, we need a Prime Minister who will for once make the right decision, put the country before her party and stand up to the reckless voices on her Back Benches and within her Cabinet. For too long this country has been held hostage to those in her party who want to drive through a “race to the bottom” Brexit deal that lowers rights and standards, and sells off our national assets to the lowest bidder. It is clear—[Interruption.]

Mr Speaker: Order. Mr Heappey, you are normally such a good-natured and laid-back fellow. I do not know what has happened to you. I do not know what you had for breakfast, but tip me off afterwards and I will make sure to avoid it. We need an atmosphere of calm. Nobody in this Chamber—questioner or anybody answering, namely the Prime Minister—will be shouted down, and that is the end of it. It is as simple as that.

Jeremy Corbyn: It is clear that the Prime Minister’s failure to stand up to the warring factions on her own side has led us to this impasse. Let me remind the Prime Minister and Conservative Members what they signed up to just 10 months ago:

“In the absence of agreed solutions, the United Kingdom will maintain full alignment with those rules of the Internal Market and the Customs Union which, now or in the future, support North-South cooperation, the all-island economy and the protection of the 1998 Agreement.”

Does that still stand? That is an interesting question for the Prime Minister.

The Prime Minister is now hoping that she can cobble together a deal that avoids all the big questions us to what our future partnership with the European Union will be. Is it not the case that the backstop is necessary only because the Government will not agree to a new comprehensive customs union with the EU, with a say for Britain in future trade deals? How long is her envisaged temporary deal? One year? Two years? Five years? More? Britain deserves a bit better than this. The blindfold Brexit that the Government are cooking up is a bridge to nowhere and a dangerous leap in the dark.

Let me be clear that the only thing we can trust this Government to do is to impose more years of austerity on the people of this country. The Prime Minister wants to present Brexit as a choice between her deal and no deal. This is simply not the case. There is an alternative option—an alternative that can command the support of Parliament and the country. Labour has set out our six tests. Indeed, at times the Prime Minister has said that she will meet them. Labour’s plan—[Interruption.]

Mr Speaker: Order. An even better-natured fellow, the hon. Member for Colchester—normally the embodiment of charm and good grace—is very overexcited. We will get you in due course, Mr Quince, do not worry.

Jeremy Corbyn: Labour’s plan is for Britain and the EU to negotiate a permanent customs union to protect jobs and manufacturing. We want a deal that allows us to strengthen rights and working standards so that we can avoid a race to the bottom, and we want a deal for all regions and nations that allows us to invest in local infrastructure, local transport and energy markets so that we can grow our economy again. Labour will not give the Government a blank cheque to go down the reckless path they are set on at present.

Let me be clear that the choice for this Parliament should never be the Prime Minister’s deal or no deal. If this Government cannot get a good deal for this country, they have to make way for those who can. The Prime Minister faces a simple and inescapable choice: be buffeted this way and that by the chaos of her own party, or back a deal that can win the support of Parliament and the people of this country.

The Prime Minister: Perhaps I could point out a few things to the right hon. Gentleman. He says that the discussion on the backstop was in order to avoid the questions of the future relationship. If he had actually listened to my statement—in fact, he received an early copy of it—he would have heard me make it clear that we have made good progress on both the structure and scope of the future relationship, which we have been discussing alongside the withdrawal agreement. He also talks about there being a better deal available. Well, we never hear from the Labour party exactly what deal it thinks it wants. What we have seen—[Interruption.]

Mr Speaker: Order. There is far too much noise. I said a moment ago that the Leader of the Opposition must be heard, and the Prime Minister must also be heard.

The Prime Minister: What we have heard from Labour Members is that at one point that they want to do really good trade deals around the rest of the world, and the next moment they want to tie us into the Brussels trade deals by being part of the customs union. One minute they say they want to respect the vote of the British people in relation to free movement; the next minute
they say, “Well, actually, no, free movement is still on the table.” What we constantly see from them is no firm proposals on this particular issue.

Labour Members also talk about being in a customs union. May I say to the right hon. Gentleman—this is perhaps the sort of detail he may not have recognised—that even if we were to go down the route of the sort of deal that might involve being in a customs union, it wouldn’t still be necessary to have a backstop, in case there was a delay between bringing that in and the end of the implementation period. Certainly, on this side of the House, we are very clear about our commitments to the people of Northern Ireland and our commitments to the United Kingdom.

The right hon. Gentleman then said, “What have we got to show for all of this that has been undertaken?” What we have got to show for it is: the vast majority of the withdrawal agreement agreed; and significant progress and agreement on the structure and scope of the future relationship. What we also have to show for it is a Government who are determined to deliver on the vote of the British people, unlike an Opposition who want to frustrate the people’s vote and frustrate Brexit.

Mr Iain Duncan Smith (Chingford and Woodford Green) (Con): May I urge my right hon. Friend not to listen to the groundhog opposite, who does not have any interesting questions, but to rely on one specific question? I agree with my right hon. Friend that we are not going to be and will not be in the customs union—being out of the customs union is a pledge that she made and that the British people voted for. The question I ask her is: she made her decision on that, but how long does she think this temporary arrangement might last and, most importantly, who would make the final decision on when it ends?

The Prime Minister: In relation to the UK-wide customs arrangement, we set out when we published our proposals in June that we would expect that to end by December 2021. My right hon. Friend asked me what I want to see and what I think in relation to this arrangement. I do not want to see the backstop having to be used at all. I want to ensure that we deliver for the people of Northern Ireland through the future relationship and that that future relationship comes into place on 1 January 2021 when the implementation period ends, so that we do not have to see this backstop arrangement being used at all.

Peter Grant (Glenrothes) (SNP): I am grateful to the Prime Minister for advance sight of her statement. First, may I apologise on behalf of my right hon. Friend the Member for Ross, Skye and Lochaber (Ian Blackford), who, as is often the way when coming from a remote location, has been delayed in transit?

This morning, Scotland’s First Minister launched “Scotland’s Place in Europe: Our Way Forward”, which is the latest in a series of analyses on the ongoing negotiations and sets out the best—or least worst—possible future for Scotland. The first of these Scottish Government analysis papers came 18 months before Chequers and, to date, has not led to a single resignation from the Scottish Cabinet. The sense of unity and the responsibility being demonstrated by the Government in Edinburgh could hardly be in more marked contrast to what we see from the UK Government here today.

Last night, the negotiations collapsed again. Did the Secretary of State go dashing off to Brussels just to fail? Or did he go because his officials had told him a deal was close? If that is the case, surely this House is entitled to know what, yet again, went wrong at the last minute. The Government’s official explanations only make sense if the Prime Minister has decided that the proposal she signed up to last December is unworkable.

The reality of all this weighs heavily across communities, particularly on the island of Ireland. We are three days away from the EU Council summit, and the UK Government continue to show at best disdain and at worst open contempt for the people of Ireland and for the Good Friday agreement. The Government clearly have no real understanding of what communities on both sides of the border are feeling about these negotiations. As long ago as last December, the Brexit Select Committee, despite an over-representation of hardliners, made it clear:

“We do not currently see how it will be possible to reconcile there being no border with the Government’s policy of leaving the Single Market”—[Interruption.]

Mr Speaker: Order. I am trying to hear the hon. Gentleman. Let’s hear the fella. [Interruption.] Order. I know that there is much noise. The hon. Member for Glasgow South (Stewart Malcolm McDonald) was pointing out that there is a lot of noise. I am well aware of that fact, and he does not need to conduct the orchestra.

Peter Grant: We can see how the Prime Minister’s Back Benchers have responded to her appeal for cool, calm heads. We can understand why she struggles to keep her party together when there are hard questions to be answered.

What was striking was the contrast in reaction from the Tory Back Benchers: when the Prime Minister committed to defend the Good Friday agreement, there was at best a lukewarm response, but there were then three hearty cheers when she said that we were taking Northern Ireland out of the customs union. It tells us where the Tory party’s priorities lie. A Conservative party playing politics with people’s lives for the sake of its own political survival is nothing short of disgraceful.

There is a better way. It is time for the Prime Minister to disown the extreme hard-line minority in her own party. She has the chance to resolve the question of the Irish border to protect jobs, to prevent the economic catastrophe that we face and to respect the result of the referendum in 2016. Will she now accept that she got it wrong? Will she now commit to a damage limitation Brexit and accept that there is a significant consensus in this House in favour of remaining in the single market and the customs union? I say to her to ignore her own career prospects, to ignore the career ambitions of those behind her and to look instead at the hundreds of thousands of people whose jobs are at risk if this goes wrong. Will she take the right decision now and work with those on all Benches in this House to ensure that a United Kingdom stays in the single market and in the customs union?
The Prime Minister: I will pick up on a number of those points. It interests me that the hon. Gentleman was talking about the importance to him of staying in the single market, presumably because of his concern about trade with the European Union. Well, we want to have a good trade deal with the European Union, but we also want to be free to be able to negotiate our own trade deals around the rest of the world. He asked what were still the areas of disagreement between us and the European Union in relation to the withdrawal agreement, and I set those out in my statement. I am afraid that he used a very unfortunate term. He said that we were showing contempt for the people of Northern Ireland and Ireland. Far from that, it is precisely because we recognise our commitment to the people of Northern Ireland that we are working hard to ensure that we deliver no hard border between Northern Ireland and Ireland and to ensure that people and businesses in Northern Ireland are able to carry on their day-to-day lives and their business as they can do today.

The hon. Gentleman also started off by referencing a piece of work that talked about the best economic future for Scotland. I hate to have to remind the Scottish piece of work that talked about the best economic future for Scotland and Ireland. If we are able to carry on our day-to-day lives and our businesses as they can do today.

Boris Johnson (Uxbridge and South Ruislip) (Con): I know that my right hon. Friend will appreciate that, in deciding to remain in the customs union, the Leader of the Opposition is guilty of a shameful U-turn and a betrayal of millions of people—[Interruption.]

Mr Speaker: Order. I want to hear the right hon. Gentleman. Let’s hear the fella.

Boris Johnson: In that case, I will repeat that the right hon. Gentleman, the Leader of the Opposition, is guilty of a shameful U-turn and a betrayal of millions of people who voted leave. Will my right hon. Friend the Prime Minister confirm, as I think she has just said, that the very latest deadline by which this country will take back control of our tariff schedules in Geneva and vary those tariffs independently of Brussels in order to do free trade deals will be, as I think she has just said, December 2021? If that is not the deadline, will she say what it is?

The Prime Minister: My right hon. Friend is absolutely right in pointing out the U-turn of the Leader of the Opposition. As I referenced in my response to him, the Opposition cannot hold the position both that they want to do trade deals around the rest of the world and also that they want to be part of a customs union. As I said, when we published the temporary customs arrangement proposal back in June, we set as a point of expectation that that would be completed by December 2021. As I indicated in my statement, one issue that we are discussing with the European Union is how we can ensure that we do reflect—properly reflect—the temporary nature of the backstop. I continue to believe that what we should all be doing is working to ensure that the backstop never comes into place and that, actually, it is not December 2021 that we are talking about, but 1 January 2021.

Hilary Benn (Leeds Central) (Lab): In the paper that was published on 7 June, proposing a way to keep an open border in Northern Ireland, the Government said that their temporary customs arrangement would be in place “until the future customs arrangement can be introduced”. The Prime Minister has just reminded the House that she expects those arrangements to be in place by December 2021 at the latest—which, incidentally, is a whole year after the end of the proposed transition period—but since the expectation of an end date is not the same as a definite end date, when is she going to tell her party that we cannot have a fixed artificial time limit on the fall-back that the Government are trying to negotiate with the EU?

The Prime Minister: May I say, as I have in relation to a number of questions on this point, that we are very clear on this? The purpose of the backstop is to be an insurance policy such that if the future relationship is not in place by 1 January 2021, there is an arrangement that ensures no hard border between Northern Ireland and Ireland; so it is there for the time until the future relationship can come into place. As we indicated in June, we expect that to be no later than December 2021, but we will be working to ensure that that point comes as early as possible because it is in everybody’s interests to ensure that we are able to move seamlessly into the future relationship after the implementation period without actually having to enter into another sort of relationship in the interim period. That is what the backstop would be, and that is why we want to work to ensure that the backstop never has to come into place.

Amber Rudd (Hastings and Rye) (Con): This is a moment of great importance, which is why the Chamber is so full of Members of Parliament who are here to speak on behalf of their communities and—given the relevance of this particular discussion—on behalf of their businesses. As the Prime Minister listens to the very many different voices in this House that she is blessed to hear from, I urge her to respond by working on those compromises with the EU not just on behalf of the 52%, but also on behalf of the 48%. It is on behalf of the 100% that we need to deliver on leaving the European Union.

The Prime Minister: Let me give my right hon. Friend the assurance that the Government and I are looking for a deal on the future relationship with the European Union that is good for the whole United Kingdom and that reflects the interests of the whole United Kingdom. We want to ensure that we have the freedom to do trade deals around the rest of the world and that we protect the jobs and livelihoods that today depend on the relationship and the trading relationship with the EU. What we are looking for, what I am looking for and what I am sure my right hon. Friend and other right hon. and hon. Friends are looking for is a deal that is good for the whole United Kingdom.

Sir Vince Cable (Twickenham) (LD): Why does the Prime Minister really find it necessary to make this statement today, given that it does not advance one iota our understanding that, in relation to Ireland, Brexit means borders, bureaucracy and ultimately—betrayal of the Good Friday agreement?

The Prime Minister: The right hon. Gentleman frequently stands up in this Chamber to complain about the lack of members of the Government coming to the House of Commons to inform Members about matters, but I
The Prime Minister: My hon. Friend obviously one of my hon. Friends who has paid particular, very careful attention to these issues, but I do not agree with the situation that he has set out. We have been negotiating with the European Union. That has seen both the European Union recognising our arguments and moving its position in relation to some issues, and our recognising our need to put forward proposals that are acceptable to us but that recognise the concerns that have been expressed by the European Union.

But what we are doing, and what I am doing, is making sure that any deal that we have is the deal that is best for the future of the United Kingdom. That is a deal that delivers on the Brexit vote but does so in a way that protects jobs and livelihoods.

In relation to the future relationship, I want to ensure that that future relationship can start at the end of the implementation period, in which case, of course, there would be no question of a different relationship with the European Union for any period of time. We have agreed the financial settlement as part of the withdrawal settlement, as my hon. Friend knows, but I remind the House, yet again, that this was a phrase first used, I think, by the EU itself—nothing is agreed until everything is agreed.

Yvette Cooper (Normanton, Pontefract and Castleford) (Lab): The Prime Minister will know that there is a real fear that the Government will delay pinning down any deal until the last possible minute so that they can try to bounce Parliament with the threat that it is her deal or no deal. She knows that that would be unacceptable to Parliament, but she also knows how damaging no deal would be in terms of security as well as jobs and the economy. So will she confirm that it would be better to apply for an extension to article 50 than to crash out with no deal?

The Prime Minister: I do not believe that we should be extending article 50. I have been very clear that we should not be extending article 50. I am a little bemused by the right hon. Lady’s first suggestion. We have legislated here in Parliament for a process that ensures that there will be not just the deliberations that this House will rightly have on the withdrawal agreement and implementation Bill, but a meaningful vote in this House prior to that. [Hos. MEMBERS: “When?”] Labour Members say “When?” Of course, we are still in negotiations with the European Union in terms of delivering on the deal, and we continue to work to the timetable that has recently been set out.

Anna Soubry (Broxtowe) (Con): Does my right hon. Friend agree that this is not what leave voters voted for? Leave voters and businesses in Broxtowe were promised a deal on trade not after we have left the European Union, but at the time that we leave the European Union. They were told that it would be the easiest deal in the history of trade deals. They were told that it would convey the “exact same benefits” as our membership of the single market and the customs union. What we now see is complete chaos and a total mess. Would the Prime Minister consider that, if her Government cannot get a grip on this, and if Parliament cannot get a grip on this, then it is time to face up to the fact that Brexit cannot be delivered, take it back to the people, and have a people’s vote?

The Prime Minister: As I have consistently said on this issue, this Parliament voted overwhelmingly to give the choice to the British people as to whether to leave or remain in the European Union. The people voted to leave the European Union, and I believe it is a matter of faith in our democracy, and the integrity of politicians, that we deliver for people on that vote. That is why it is so important to recognise—there is talk of a people’s vote; of going back to the people for a vote—that the people were given a vote. The people’s vote happened in 2016 and the people voted to leave.

Nigel Dodds (Belfast North) (DUP): In order to avoid a hard border on the island of Ireland, which nobody wants, it can never be right that we have any kind of borders in the Irish sea between Northern Ireland and the rest of the United Kingdom. The Prime Minister knows that we “could not support any deal that creates a border of any kind in the Irish Sea”.

Those are not my words—they are the words of Ruth Davidson, the leader of the Scottish Conservatives. Will the Prime Minister confirm today that, as she said in her statement, she could never accept a proposal “backstop that would see Northern Ireland carved off in the EU’s customs union and part of the single market, separated through a border in the Irish sea from the UK’s own internal market”?

Would she confirm that the UK is leaving the EU together with no part hived off either in the single market or customs union differences?

The Prime Minister: When we leave the European Union, it will be the UK that leaves the European Union. We will be leaving the European Union together. I am very clear that there should be no hard border between Northern Ireland and Ireland, but, as we have put forward in our proposals, we can deliver on that and maintain the integrity of our Union. We made that very clear when the European Union made its backstop proposal that would effectively have carved Northern Ireland away from the rest of the United Kingdom. We cannot accept the EU’s backstop to a backstop precisely because it continues to want to see that. In fact what we want to see in a backstop is a situation where Northern Ireland businesses can export freely to Great Britain and to the European Union. That would be a good position for Northern Ireland businesses.
EU Exit Negotiations

John Redwood (Wokingham) (Con): Trying to sign a withdrawal agreement without having legally binding texts on the future partnership would leave the UK in a deeply vulnerable position and unable to negotiate properly. Will the Prime Minister confirm that, in her view, no deal is still a lot better than a bad deal, and that a bad deal is giving £39 billion away, for no good reason, that we need to spend on our priorities?

The Prime Minister: I still believe that no deal is better than a bad deal. I am still working for what I believe is the best outcome for the UK, which is a good negotiated deal with the European Union for the future, but of course, we continue with our no-deal preparations. As my right hon. Friend will know, the negotiations on the financial settlement have already taken place. We are clear about the importance of linking the withdrawal agreement to the future relationship, such that we cannot find ourselves in a limbo situation and that we are able to see that future relationship committed to by the European Union and put in place. As I say, I want to see it put in place on 1 January 2021.

Mr Pat McFadden (Wolverhampton South East) (Lab): The issue over the Irish border is a direct result of the wilful dismissal of its importance before the referendum campaign and the wilful disregard of its importance by leading Brexit advocates since the referendum. They now advocate a Canada-style free trade agreement. Will the Prime Minister confirm that, in her view, no deal is still a lot better than a bad deal, and that a bad deal is giving £39 billion away, for no good reason, that we need to spend on our priorities?

The Prime Minister: Of course, what we have seen from the European Union is that a Canada-style deal is not available or on offer for the whole of the United Kingdom; it is only on offer for Great Britain, with Northern Ireland effectively carved out from the rest of the United Kingdom. The proposals that the Government have put forward following the discussions that the Cabinet had in July at Chequers are focused on a free trade deal with frictionless trade at its heart. A Canada-style deal does not deliver on frictionless trade and therefore does not deliver the absolute guarantee of no hard border between Northern Ireland and Ireland or, indeed, frictionless trade at our other borders.

Nicky Morgan (Loughborough) (Con): The Prime Minister is right to say that a negotiated deal is the best outcome for the United Kingdom. She is also right to say that protecting the Union is of fundamental importance to Members on all sides of the Brexit debate on the Government Benches. But as we just heard from my right hon. Friend the Member for Wokingham (John Redwood), there are people who disagree with what she said in her statement about the “no-deal outcome that no one wants”. There are people in this House and on the Government Benches who want a no-deal outcome.

John Redwood indicated assent.

Nicky Morgan: My right hon. Friend is nodding.

People in this country are now really concerned and worried about no deal, including businesses, EU citizens living here and British citizens living in the EU. I urge the Prime Minister to ensure that we do not slip into any kind of no-deal scenario, because I believe that this House will not support it and therefore would have to step into the negotiations.

The Prime Minister: As I said earlier in response to a question, I am clear that we are working to get a good deal for the whole of the United Kingdom, but it is also right that we continue our preparations for no deal because we do not know what the outcome of those negotiations will be. I think it is right that we ensure that the deal we bring back is a good deal for the whole of the United Kingdom.

Liz Kendall (Leicester West) (Lab): Does the Prime Minister stand by the commitment made by the Brexit Secretary to this House last week that the Government will publish a specific end date to the Irish backstop as part of the withdrawal agreement?

The Prime Minister: As I said both in my statement and in response to other questions, one of the issues that we are discussing with the European Union remains this issue of ensuring that the backstop is a temporary arrangement and that we cannot be kept in a permanent relationship of that sort with the European Union. The backstop is intended as an insurance policy for the people of Northern Ireland. I do not want that backstop ever to be put in place; I want to ensure we negotiate a future relationship that can start at the end of the implementation period.

Sir Peter Bottomley (Worthing West) (Con): After the referendum, a large majority of MPs across the House were elected to help this country to negotiate a future outside the EU, with trade arrangements that are sensible and that allow us to use our control over money, borders and the like in a way that is beneficial to us and beneficial to others. Will my right hon. Friend assure our negotiating partners that less friction is better than more friction?

The Prime Minister: Yes, it is precisely because we believe in the value of frictionless trade that we have put forward a proposal that would indeed deliver on frictionless trade.

Mr Ben Bradshaw (Exeter) (Lab): It must be obvious to the Prime Minister that there is no majority in this place for a hard or no-deal Brexit, and she cannot do the sensible thing on the customs union and the single market because half her party and the DUP will not let her, so is she never tempted by the suggestion of her right hon. Friend the Member for Broxtowe (Anna Soubry) that the way out of this mess—for her and for the country—will be a people’s vote?

The Prime Minister: No. I am going to repeat what I have said, in response to the right hon. Gentleman. The people had a vote in 2016. It was in a referendum. This Parliament gave the people that vote. The people voted to leave, and that is what we will deliver.
Justine Greening (Putney) (Con): Whether leave or remain, we can all agree that in the past Britain may have pooled its sovereignty, but we have never just given it away. Does the Prime Minister accept that the common rulebook represents a unique loss of sovereignty for Britain, but that for the first time we will have tied the hands of future generations, to be bound by rules they will have had no chance to write?

The Prime Minister: No. I am afraid I do not agree with my right hon. Friends on the definition she has set out, precisely because the proposal that we have put forward involves a parliamentary lock. It will be this Parliament that will decide on those rules—whether we adopt those rules and whether we adopt any further changes to those rules.

Mr Chris Leslie (Nottingham East) (Lab/Co-op): Is not the Prime Minister’s problem that she is dancing to the tune of the hard Brexiteers—the duo from Uxbridge and Somerset—and we should not therefore be surprised that she is taking the country towards an inferior, low-grade, hard-Brexit FTA deal? Will she give an undertaking that, when this House—when Members of Parliament—look at that deal and decide that, actually, it is not right for the country and we decide a different course, she will respect the decision of Members of Parliament to put this question to a people’s vote?

The Prime Minister: The hon. Gentleman will know full well that it is very clearly set out what the process would be—what the procedure would be—were it to be the case that this Government were to bring a proposal back to this House and the meaningful vote were not to support that particular proposal.

Mr Owen Paterson (North Shropshire) (Con): What are the cross-border transactions between Northern Ireland and the Republic of Ireland that so threaten the integrity of the European single market and customs union that they cannot be resolved by existing techniques or existing processes under existing law, none of which requires hard infrastructure on the border?

The Prime Minister: There are arrangements in relation to customs checks that would be put in place were it not the case that we had come to an agreement to have a customs arrangement that did not require those checks to take place. I have seen and have heard of a number of proposals for technical solutions to deal with those issues. I have to say to my right hon. Friend that some of those technical solutions effectively involve moving the border—and it would still be a border. Some involve equipment, which could come under attack, and some involve a degree of state surveillance that, frankly, I think would not be acceptable in Northern Ireland.

Joanna Cherry (Edinburgh South West) (SNP): It is reported today that the Prime Minister wants the meaningful vote to take place on 27 November. The 27 November is the same day that the European Court of Justice will hear the Scottish Court’s referral on the question of whether article 50 can be unilaterally revoked. My question for the Prime Minister is, is she afraid of MPs knowing the answer to that question before we have the meaningful vote?

The Prime Minister: First of all, the hon. and learned Lady is making an assumption about the date of the meaningful vote, and we are still in negotiations. Secondly, no, because the point about whether article 50 can be revoked is that this Government will not be revoking article 50—we are going to keep article 50.

Damian Green (Ashford) (Con): The Government were clearly right to reject that part of the Commission’s proposals that would have threatened the integrity of the United Kingdom, but it is salutary that what the European Commission produced was a deal that would have been worse than no deal. Despite that, can my right hon. Friend assure me and the House that she will continue to work very hard to make sure that we get a deal? I believe that, apart from a relatively small number of people who genuinely believe that no deal would be a good thing for this country, and apart from a few people who would vote against a deal for purely partisan reasons, there is an enormous majority in this House for a negotiated settlement to this procedure.

The Prime Minister: I can give my right hon. Friend that assurance. We will continue to work for a good deal, because I believe a good deal is the best outcome for the people of the United Kingdom.

Ms Angela Eagle (Wallasey) (Lab): The DUP, which has sustained the Prime Minister in office, has made it clear that it thinks no deal is almost inevitable. What does she think?

The Prime Minister: We continue to work for a good deal for the whole of the United Kingdom.

Mr Dominic Grieve (Beaconsfield) (Con): I wish my right hon. Friend every good thing in this negotiation, but I do point out to her that we are heading towards a conclusion where we are going to be in an at least two-year relationship with the EU—which is a condition of vassalage, because we have absolutely no say in the rule making, but we are tied to it—and we are going to be bound by a common rulebook afterwards, even if she is successful. I have to say to her that, in those circumstances, I will not be able to support the Government in this, unless this matter is put to the British people again. It is entirely different from what was discussed and negotiated during the referendum in 2016.

The Prime Minister: I say gently to my right hon. and learned Friend that I think I recall the time when he was in favour of the Government negotiating an implementation period for our withdrawal from the European Union, to bridge the point between our leaving on 29 March 2019 and the point at which the future relationship would come into place. We have set out the reasons why it is important for us to ensure that at the heart of our future relationship is a free trade deal that has frictionless trade at its heart—that is a good trade deal for the United Kingdom, but also enables us to undertake good trade deals with others around the world.

Emma Little Pengelly (Belfast South) (DUP): Can the Prime Minister give a firm commitment that nothing will be agreed with the European Union that would exclude Northern Ireland from any part of any future UK trade deals?
The Prime Minister: In the future relationship, we will be negotiating trade deals on behalf of the whole of the United Kingdom, including Northern Ireland.

Mr Jacob Rees-Mogg (North East Somerset) (Con): My right hon. Friend made the excellent point that it would be unlawful to have a separate customs arrangement for Northern Ireland. Why did that point escape the negotiators until so late in the process?

The Prime Minister: The point about not having a customs border down the Irish sea is not one that has escaped negotiators. We have been very clear: we were clear when the proposal was first published by the European Union earlier this year and we have consistently been clear that such an arrangement was one that the UK Government could not accept.

Mr George Howarth (Knowsley) (Lab): Does not the existence of a backstop serve only to illustrate the fact that the Prime Minister has actually wasted the last two years?

The Prime Minister: No.

Antoinette Sandbach (Eddisbury) (Con): Employees in the car manufacturing, pharmaceuticals, and food and drink manufacturing sector in Eddisbury want to manufacture to a single rulebook, with frictionless trade. Can the Prime Minister confirm that this remains her negotiating position?

The Prime Minister: We continue to negotiate on the basis that the best deal for the future is one that has frictionless trade at its heart. That would be good for businesses here, and good for jobs and livelihoods here, but it would also deliver on the vote of the British people.

Alison McGovern (Wirral South) (Lab): Given the trouble being caused to the Prime Minister by a relatively small number of Members, does she not now regret not seeking cross-party consent for her negotiating objectives?

The Prime Minister: We have a very clear negotiating objective in relation to the deal we are getting from the European Union. Sadly, what I see from the Labour party Front Bench is not a consistent approach in relation to that. The Government set out our approach in Lancaster House and we have followed that through at every stage of the negotiations.

Stephen Crabb (Preseli Pembrokeshire) (Con): When it comes to signing the political declaration on the future relationship, will my right hon. Friend confirm that it will be clear, specific and binding, so that business has more certainty and that we do not just begin another period of Brexit fog and uncertainty?

The Prime Minister: This is precisely why we want to ensure that there is a proper linkage between the withdrawal agreement and the future relationship, so that certainty can be given on what the future relationship is and that that is going to come into place. I think that that is what the House will want to see as well when it comes to look at the meaningful vote.

Stella Creasy (Walthamstow) (Lab/Co-op): The Prime Minister has chastised Labour’s six tests. Let us look at the one she set, which is that frictionless trade must be the condition for signing up to the withdrawal agreement. Two and a half years on, all the whizz-bang technology you like and a temporary customs arrangement later shows that only staying in the customs union can do that. So in meeting her own test, the Prime Minister will face the same challenge she faces now: is it friction with the European Research Group or the future of the people of Northern Ireland that matters more? Her refusal to let the British public sort this out through a final-say deal shows that it is not the country.

The Prime Minister: As I have said to others, the British people made their decision on our leaving the European Union. If the hon. Lady wants to know how to deliver frictionless trade, she should read the White Paper.

Greg Hands (Chelsea and Fulham) (Con): I am delighted that my right hon. Friend has rejected the Opposition proposal to be in a customs union in the EU, which was of course rejected by this House only in July. Apart from the most important reason—having our tariffs and trade policy determined by Brussels without our having a seat at the table—it would also mean we would have no control over trade defences, dumping, unfair trade practices or trade preferences for the developing world. Does she therefore agree with me that it would illogical to agree to be in a customs union with the European Union beyond December 2020?

The Prime Minister: First, I commend my right hon. Friend for the work he did on our trade policy when he was a trade Minister. I absolutely want to see that we are able to put those new trade arrangements into place at the end of the implementation period. I want to see that future relationship coming into play at that point, which of course would be 1 January 2021.

Tom Brake (Carshalton and Wallington) (LD): Does the Prime Minister accept that the best interests of the country are not served by a gaggle of self-serving Cabinet Ministers threatening to resign, but by allowing the people a vote in a people’s vote?

The Prime Minister: I am quite happy to repeat what I have said in answer to all those Members who have proposed a people’s vote. We had a people’s vote. It was called the referendum and the people voted to leave.

Sir Nicholas Soames (Mid Sussex) (Con): I welcome the Prime Minister’s statement and the progress that has been made, but will my right hon. Friend make it clear that throughout the tangle of these incredibly complex and difficult negotiations, security co-operation must remain a national priority, and will she confirm unequivocally that this will be the case?

The Prime Minister: I am very happy to give that reassurance to my right hon. Friend. I am pleased to say that we are making good progress in our discussions with the European Union on both internal and external security matters.
Emma Reynolds (Wolverhampton North East) (Lab): The Prime Minister has clearly ruled out a Canadian-style free trade agreement. As she rightly says, such an agreement would not lead to frictionless trade, and indeed would be disastrous for our food, automotive and aerospace industries, among others. However, will she explain how she will guarantee jobs in these industries and deliver frictionless trade if the UK leaves the customs union, and will these customs arrangements be detailed in the political declaration that we will have to vote on?

The Prime Minister: The hon. Lady wants to know how we will deliver frictionless trade in the circumstances—read the White Paper.

Sir Oliver Heald (North East Hertfordshire) (Con): The Prime Minister spoke about the need to take a cool and calculated approach to the negotiations and that everything that has been achieved so far in the negotiations has been a result of that approach. But does she agree that to have the sort of free trade that we want, it must be frictionless, or as frictionless as possible, with the EU so that our manufacturers can continue to have those very important businesses and all the jobs that go with them? With that in mind, I hope that she will send our Brexit Secretary over the channel as often as possible to achieve the result we want—that is, a good deal for Britain.

The Prime Minister: I agree with the hon. Gentleman that we need a free flow of trade on the basis of our proposals in the White Paper.

Liz McInnes (Heywood and Middleton) (Lab): Will the Prime Minister update the House on the progress being made on the other border between the UK and the EU—the border between Gibraltar and Spain?

The Prime Minister: I am happy to say that discussions are continuing in relation to the matter because it will of course be part of the withdrawal agreement that we will look to enter into. There have been positive and constructive negotiations taking place, but they are still in progress.

Mr Peter Bone (Wellingborough) (Con): The Prime Minister has always said that the United Kingdom will leave the EU on 29 March next year and that any agreement will be based on ending the free movement of people, not sending billions and billions of pounds to the EU each and every year, and making our own laws in our own country, judged by our own judges. Does she still believe that that is possible?

The Prime Minister: Yes.

Mike Gapes (Ilford South) (Lab/Co-op): The Good Friday agreement took months of intensive negotiation and was then agreed in simultaneous referendums by overwhelming majorities in both Northern Ireland and the Republic. The position as regards the 2016 referendum was that it was a narrow majority on an advisory referendum. Which does the Prime Minister think is more important?

The Prime Minister: I think that both of these are important. That is why the Government, as we negotiate the terms on which we are leaving the European Union and the terms of our future relationship, are very clear that we remain fully committed to the Belfast agreement.

Heidi Allen (South Cambridgeshire) (Con): I do not wish to labour the point, but like my right hon. Friend the Member for Loughborough (Nicky Morgan) my businesses and constituents in South Cambridgeshire are terrified of a no deal, too. If that comes to pass and the Prime Minister will not entertain an extension of article 50, but accepts the reality that there is no way that no deal will pass through this House, I ask with the greatest respect: what option does that leave us other than going back to the people? What else can we do?

The Prime Minister: My hon. Friend’s question involves a number of assumptions. We are working to get a good deal with the European Union. If, at the end of the negotiation process, both sides agreed that no deal was there, that would actually come back to this House, and then we would see what position the House would take in the circumstances of the time.

Stephen Kinnock (Aberavon) (Lab): The Prime Minister keeps advising hon. Members that if they want to know how to keep frictionless trade, they should just read the White Paper, but surely the Salzburg summit taught her that the White Paper was completely and utterly dead in the water. What is her plan B?

The Prime Minister: That is not the case. We have been negotiating with the European Union on the structure and scope of the future relationship, and we have been doing that on the basis of our proposals in the White Paper.

Mr Mark Harper (Forest of Dean) (Con): In trying to come up with a constructive solution, will my right hon. Friend remind the EU of what it signed up to in last December’s joint report? It signed up to unfettered access for Northern Ireland’s businesses to the whole of the rest of the UK, and also to her commitment to follow only those rules that would be necessary for that north-south co-operation. If she reminded it of what it signed up to, we might make some progress.

The Prime Minister: My right hon. Friend makes a very good point. It was a joint report, and the basis on which we were looking to avoid a hard border between Northern Ireland and Ireland was very clear.

Stephen Timms (East Ham) (Lab): Some people in the House who have been supporting the Government seem to think that the solution is to have a hard border in Northern Ireland but not to enforce it. Is not that prospect just a myth?

The Prime Minister: The Government are committed to ensuring that we have no hard border between Northern Ireland and Ireland, and that is what we are working for.
Mr David Jones (Clwyd West) (Con): Will my right hon. Friend confirm that when she meets her EU counterparts later this week, she will tell them that although we are a patient people, our patience is not inexhaustible, and that if it continues to maintain its present negotiating stance of seeking to divide the United Kingdom internally, we will have to assume that it is not serious about achieving a negotiated settlement and therefore be obliged to prepare for no deal?

The Prime Minister: We are all operating to a timetable—we will leave the European Union on 29 March next year—and we are clear that to get legislation through the House, we must follow a timetable and the negotiations need to end to match that timetable. I have said—I am very clear; the Government are very clear—that we cannot accept Northern Ireland effectively being divided from the rest of the UK.

Wes Streeting (Ilford North) (Lab): Of course there has been a people’s vote since the referendum—the general election—when the public sent the Prime Minister the clear message that there was no majority in the country for a hard Brexit. Given that, and given that she was told very clearly that there was no majority in the House for Chequers and the White Paper, why does she expect Labour MPs to ride to her rescue and vote for a hard Brexit that would cost people’s jobs in our constituencies and the country at large?

The Prime Minister: There has indeed been a general election since the referendum. Over 80% of Members stood on a manifesto promise to deliver on the vote of the people to leave the EU.

Sir Desmond Swayne (New Forest West) (Con): Were it to become necessary to implement a backstop agreement, the subsequent ending of that arrangement must be a matter for the British Government, must it not?

The Prime Minister: As I said in my statement, if it is necessary to implement a backstop agreement, we will want to ensure that we, as the British Government, can ensure that it is indeed temporary and does not become permanent.

Catherine McKinnell (Newcastle upon Tyne North) (Lab): It has been suggested that the Brexit Secretary has promised the Prime Minister that he will deliver Chequers while at the same time assuring the ERG that he will stop it. Will she confirm that this cannot possibly be the case and that she has full confidence in her Secretary of State?

The Prime Minister: Yes, I have absolute full confidence in my Secretary of State. The Government have been negotiating with the European Union on the basis of the White Paper, and that continues to be the case.

Vicky Ford (Chelmsford) (Con): Next spring, when the Duke and Duchess of Sussex are having their first baby, I want this country to be at a time of economic stability, and no deal is unpredictable. May I encourage my right hon. Friend to continue to press the case for innovative customs solutions that will deliver frictionless trade while listening closely to the concerns of other EU member states about the risks that they face? Only when we make progress on finding a long-term solution will the difficulties of the backstop disperse.

The Prime Minister: My hon. Friend’s question gives me an opportunity to say what I am sure was said earlier in the Chamber and give my personal congratulations to the Duke and Duchess of Sussex on the great news that we have heard today.

I assure my hon. Friend that, absolutely concentrating on the long-term solution will not only deliver a good economic future for the partnership with the European Union for this country, but ensure that we deliver on our commitment to the people of Northern Ireland.

Peter Kyle (Hove) (Lab): During the referendum and since, the people running Britain’s businesses have been promised repeatedly that they will enjoy the exact same benefits that they currently enjoy once we have left the EU. After two years of negotiation, it is patently clear that they will not. Does the Prime Minister empathise with them? Does she understand why they want to have a say on the deal themselves, and to decide for themselves whether it is fit for British business?

The Prime Minister: We have indeed been listening to British business. We have put forward a proposal for frictionless trade and a free trade area between the United Kingdom and the European Union that would deliver for British business and meet its concerns.

Dr Andrew Murrison (South West Wiltshire) (Con): Last month, Michel Barnier very helpfully said that the border that he envisions down the middle of the Irish sea would be heavily reliant on innovative technical solutions. If that is true, why is he so dismissive of the same solutions, approved and endorsed by the European Parliament, in respect of the land border on the island of Ireland?

The Prime Minister: As I said earlier, a number of comments have been made about issues relating to the border and the possibility of technical solutions. We have made it very clear to the European Union—including, obviously, Michel Barnier—that any suggestion that there should be a customs border down the Irish sea is one that this Government cannot accept.

Albert Owen (Ynys Môn) (Lab): The Republic of Ireland is the main trading link with the United Kingdom, through the port of Holyhead in my constituency. I have been raising this issue with the Prime Minister for the last 18 months. Businesses are worried because contingency plans have been undertaken by Irish companies to go directly to the European continent. What assurances can the Prime Minister give to businesses in my community that that will not happen?

The Prime Minister: We continue to negotiate in relation to our future economic partnership. We have put forward proposals that would enable that frictionless trade to continue to take place across the sea between the hon. Gentleman’s constituents and Ireland. We continue to work on those proposals, and we are making good progress on that future relationship.

Mrs Anne Main (St Albans) (Con): I heartily welcome the Prime Minister’s firm assurances that any backstop will be temporary. Businesses that wish to trade outside
the EU would like to plan for that event, and, in my opinion, they need to have an idea of how long the backstop would last. If the Prime Minister is not prepared to specify a date, will she tell us how we can shore up the fact that nothing can derail the temporary nature for which she wishes? May I also ask her to update the House on the future of British citizens in the EU during that temporary period?

The Prime Minister: As I have said to other Members, we are very clear that this should be temporary. As I said earlier, when we published the proposals for a UK-wide customs backstop, we included the expectation that it should end by December 2021, because the future economic relationship should be in place at that point. We are also clear about the fact that we cannot be in a position in which we would be potentially trapped in a permanent backstop, for a number of reasons, one of which is that we want to negotiate trade deals around the rest of the world and gain the economic advantage for this country of doing so.

Chris Bryant (Rhondda) (Lab): I will ask this question again because I have not had an answer from the four different Ministers to whom I have asked it: after 29 March, which queue will British passport holders use when they land in Spain, France, Germany or Greece, and which queue will EU citizens use when they arrive in the UK?

The Prime Minister: The Home Office is looking at the arrangements that will take place at the border after 29 March 2019. As to those arrangements for UK citizens entering other countries within the EU, of course they are a matter for those countries. One of the issues that we have put forward in the White Paper, which we will discuss with the European Union, is precisely about ensuring that those who wish to travel as tourists, for example, between the United Kingdom and the 27 member states of the European Union will be able to continue to do that as easily as possible in the future.

Richard Drax (South Dorset) (Con): There are no hardcore Brexiteers on this side of the House; there are only those who want to honour the referendum and do the best for their country. Does my right hon. Friend agree that this is now a question of trust and that, on the backstop, there is deep unease that somehow we will be left in the EU indefinitely? May I ask her this again: if we have to fall back on a backstop, will the UK have the sole right—the sole right—to pull out of it?

The Prime Minister: The point about the backstop is that it is an insurance policy for the people of Northern Ireland. I am clear that, first, it must be temporary and, secondly, we must be able to ensure that there is no way in which we can be left within that backstop as a result of a decision that the European Union takes in relation to this issue. There is a concern, I know, that somehow this will be an arrangement in which the EU does not negotiate the future economic partnership—the future relationship—and therefore we are left in limbo. That is why it is so important that we get a number of things, not least the linkage between the withdrawal agreement and the future relationship, and also reassurance in the withdrawal agreement about the temporary nature of the backstop.

Jonathan Reynolds (Stalybridge and Hyde) (Lab/Co-op): There are many of us who genuinely accept the referendum result and want the Prime Minister to agree a good deal, but we are also realists and accept that there will be trade-offs in the different deals and options. The problem with the Prime Minister repeating today her belief that we will somehow agree the Chequers proposals is surely that the EU has clearly said it will never agree to them, that the Conservative party has said it would never vote for them, if they were agreed, and, crucially, that Chequers does not resolve the big issue of substance: the question of whether the ability to unilaterally agree free trade deals is really worth the loss to the UK of frictionless supply chains in manufacturing and of market access for financial services and, even more importantly, the risk to future stability and peace in Northern Ireland.

The Prime Minister: The proposals that have been put forward that form the basis on which we are having discussions with the European Union precisely address the issues the hon. Gentleman raises. Gentleman has raised in relation to frictionless trade, and ensuring that we maintain our commitments to the Belfast agreement and that there should be no hard border between Northern Ireland and Ireland.

Dr Sarah Wollaston (Totnes) (Con): Here is some Brexit reality: AstraZeneca has announced just this afternoon that it is stopping investing in the United Kingdom. We have just 165 days to go until we leave the EU and we still have no deal, with disastrous consequences. The Prime Minister says that we cannot have a people’s vote, but is not the truth here that the people were not able to see—there is no consensus about this—which of the many versions of Brexit we will be heading towards? Once we know that final deal, would it not be reasonable to go back to the British people, present them with what is involved and what the consequences are—and then allow them to give their informed consent to moving forward?

The Prime Minister: I have answered this question on a number of occasions before this afternoon in relation to the fact that I believe it is imperative for Members of Parliament across the House to deliver on the decision that we freely gave to the people of the United Kingdom and to deliver on the vote that they took in relation to leaving the EU. My hon. Friend references the fact that there is no deal yet, but we are continuing to work for that deal. We continue in those negotiations and look forward to continuing to work with the member states of the EU and the European Commission towards that end.

Geraint Davies (Swansea West) (Lab/Co-op): In 2015, David Cameron was elected on a promise of a referendum on the EU, but promised to stay in the single market. Given that the current Prime Minister has decided to break that latter promise, and given the other promises broken since 2016—not least, those written on red buses—does she not agree that this mandate about the single market and the customs union fundamentally undermines the integrity of Britain and Northern Ireland?
Should the situation not ultimately be resolved not by a simple choice between a bad deal and no deal, but with the option of remaining in the EU through a people’s vote so that the people can look again?

The Prime Minister: As the hon. Gentleman will know, I have answered the question about the people’s vote on a number of occasions already. I refer him to my previous answers.

Charlie Elphicke (Dover) (Ind): My understanding—and that of the whole House, I believe—is that the £39 billion divorce bill is predicated on our leaving the implementation period at the end of December 2020. If the period continues until December 2021, will that be included in the divorce settlement or will it be extra?

The Prime Minister: The arrangement to which I think my hon. Friend refers is whether or not the backstop will be in place up to December 2021. That, of course, is a different arrangement from the implementation period, and it has different aspects to it from the arrangements that will be in place during the implementation period.

I repeat what I have said on a number of occasions: what I want to do, and I believe others want to do, is to work to ensure that we do not have to have that period when a backstop is in place, so that we are able to see our future relationship come in place at the end of the implementation period and we have that seamless transition.

Thangam Debbonaire (Bristol West) (Lab): This country is divided, and that was both a cause and consequence of the referendum two years ago. What is the Prime Minister’s vision for uniting the country, so that my constituents, four out of five of whom voted to remain, as well as those who voted to leave, can feel that there is something that we can all truly unite behind? I do not see it.

The Prime Minister: First, we are working to get a good deal that will deliver for the whole United Kingdom. But I would remind the hon. Lady, as I did one of her hon. Friends earlier, that the vast majority of people sitting in this Chamber were elected on a mandate to deliver on the vote of the British people.

Sir Roger Gale (North Thanet) (Con): My right hon. Friend has rightly said that she seeks a resolution on behalf of all the people of the United Kingdom and all its citizens. More than a million of those live in other countries of the European Union, and others will wish or need to leave and live in those other countries. Is she going to protect their interests, please?

The Prime Minister: When we were negotiating the citizens’ rights element of the December joint report, I was asked in this House on many occasions to give a unilateral declaration of the rights of EU citizens here in the UK. I refused to do that until we could negotiate reciprocal arrangements for United Kingdom citizens living in the remaining member states of the European Union. In some of those member states, the precise technical details of those reciprocal arrangements are still being worked through, but that was part of the citizens’ rights agreement that we came to in the December joint report.

Graham P. Jones (Hyndburn) (Lab): If the European Parliament, the EU 27 or this Parliament vote against any deal that the Prime Minister brings forward, what next?

The Prime Minister: As I said earlier, this House has set out clearly what the process would be were it to be the case that, on a meaningful vote, the position that the Government set forward was not agreed by this House.

Steve Double (St Austell and Newquay) (Con): Will the Prime Minister give a commitment that the interests of our fishermen will be considered in any agreement with the EU? Will she ensure that the full benefit of leaving the EU will be available to our fishermen when we leave?

The Prime Minister: I can give my hon. Friend that assurance. We are absolutely clear that we are coming out of the common fisheries policy and that we will be an independent coastal state. We will be able to decide and negotiate who has access to our waters.

Martin Whitfield (East Lothing) (Lab): The Prime Minister has ruled out putting a date on the backstop. Can she also rule out an indefinite backstop with a notice period?

The Prime Minister: I am very clear that we are not going to have an indefinite backstop and that we will ensure that the backstop is a temporary arrangement. As I said in my statement, “while I do not believe that this will be the case...if the EU were not to co-operate on our future relationship, we must be able to ensure that we cannot be kept in this backstop arrangement indefinitely. I would not expect this House to agree to a deal unless we have the reassurance that the UK, as a sovereign nation, has this say over our arrangements with the EU.”

Richard Graham (Gloucester) (Con): During Saturday’s excellent victory by Gloucester rugby club against the French league champions Castres Olympique, several representatives of small and medium-sized businesses focused on telling me how disastrous no deal would be, both for their and their European partners’ trade. May I therefore encourage my right hon. Friend and the Secretary of State for International Trade to highlight for EU officials the fact that the huge risks and unintended consequences of failing to reach a sensible agreement with us on the Irish border would be much greater than has hitherto been highlighted?

The Prime Minister: We continue to work for the good deal that I know my hon. Friend and others want us to be able to agree with the European Union. Obviously, we remain committed in relation to the hard border between Northern Ireland and Ireland, but we continue to make the point to the European Union that the integrity of the United Kingdom is of key importance to us and that we cannot accept anything that would challenge that integrity. Congratulations to Gloucester rugby club.

Ben Lake (Ceredigion) (PC): Recent Government figures show a 7% increase in Welsh exports to the EU, and the fact that the EU single market accounts for 61% of total exports from Wales. Given the importance
of the single market and the customs union to the Welsh economy, what representations has the Prime Minister received from the First Minister of Wales in relation to her policy of leaving both?

**The Prime Minister:** I talk to the First Minister of Wales, and the Chancellor of the Duchy of Lancaster and Minister for the Cabinet Office has spoken to Welsh and Scottish Ministers today to update them on where we are. We keep in regular contact with the Scottish and Welsh Governments on these matters.

**Alberto Costa** (South Leicestershire) (Con): A few weeks ago, the Prime Minister made the very welcome statement following Salzburg that in the event of no deal, the rights of all lawfully resident EU nationals in this country—such as my parents and other family members—would be guaranteed. Will she take this opportunity this afternoon to repeat that statement in the House for the benefit of all MPs, so that they understand clearly that it is a Conservative Government who will protect the rights of EU nationals?

**The Prime Minister:** Yes, I am happy to repeat that commitment to protect those rights of EU nationals in the event of no deal. I hope that we will see a reciprocal arrangement from the member states of the European Union for UK citizens in the event of no deal.

**Mr Paul Sweeney** (Glasgow North East) (Lab/Co-op): I never thought I would see the day when the Prime Minister’s Secretary of State for Scotland and the leader of the Scottish Conservatives, Ruth Davidson, were prayed in aid by the Democratic Unionist party in support of its arguments on the backstop. Will the Prime Minister confirm that the only way in which a backstop can function and succeed is if it undertakes the same functions as the single market and the customs union on that border? Will she stop pandering to reactionary nationalists such as our ex-Foreign Secretary and his cohort?

**The Prime Minister:** If the hon. Gentleman wants to see the details of the proposal that we put forward on the customs arrangement—[Interruption.] “Oh, we’ve heard that,” says the hon. Member for Kingston upon Hull West and Hessle (Emma Hardy). I think if she waits, she will hear a slightly different answer to the one she thinks I am about to give. If the hon. Member for Glasgow North East (Mr Sweeney) wants to see the arrangements for the UK-wide customs proposal that we put forward in response to the EU’s suggestion of a customs border down the Irish sea, he should look at the paper that we published in June.

**Mr Simon Clarke** (Middlesbrough South and East Cleveland) (Con): So far today, my right hon. Friend has failed to reassure the House that we will definitely be able to leave the backstop by 31 December 2020. She continues to argue for a common rulebook that many of us on the Government Benches will not be able to support. Will she not pivot to a super-Canada policy and focus the remaining negotiating time on the technical solutions that have been set out? I urge her to do so, please, before it is too late.

**The Prime Minister:** My hon. Friend raises a number of issues. I have been clear in this House that one of the areas where we are continuing discussions with the EU in relation to the Northern Ireland protocol, precisely because of our concerns about the issue, is the question of the temporary nature of the backstop and of ensuring that we have the means to ensure that the backstop is temporary were it ever to come into place. As for the common rulebook, there would be a parliamentary lock on that issue, and our manufacturers tell us that they would be abiding by those rules in any case, regardless of whether there was a lock. The offer that was on the table from the EU in relation to the Canada-style free trade agreement was one that related only to Great Britain and essentially carved Northern Ireland away from the rest of the United Kingdom on such matters.

**Stewart Malcolm McDonald** (Glasgow South) (SNP): It is an indisputable fact, if regrettable, that a majority of Members of this House voted to trigger article 50. Can Parliament overturn that decision?

**The Prime Minister:** It is an indisputable fact that the majority of Members of this House voted to trigger article 50, but it is also an indisputable fact that this Government have no intention of revoking article 50.

**Matt Warman** (Boston and Skegness) (Con): People may not have listened or liked what they heard, but is it not the case that not a single argument has been made since the referendum that was not made before the referendum? As such, anyone who is a democrat should reject a second vote.

**The Prime Minister:** My hon. Friend is absolutely right. Many issues have been raised in this House as though they were not discussed during the referendum. There was a full debate during the referendum process on issues about our remaining in or leaving the European Union, and it is a matter of faith in our democracy and the integrity of politicians that we deliver on that vote.

**Toby Perkins** (Chesterfield) (Lab): The Prime Minister appears to be heading towards a deal that enjoys the support of almost nobody. She is saying to the Brexiteers that they need to vote for her deal otherwise Brexit will collapse, and she is saying to more moderate voices that they need to back her deal otherwise there will be no deal. Is it not the truth that neither of those positions is actually true?

**The Prime Minister:** We are working for a good deal; we will bring that deal back; and there will be a vote in this House of Commons.

**Simon Hoare** (North Dorset) (Con): As we approach this crucial phase, I am convinced that my constituents want to be assured of one thing: that my right hon. Friend is not negotiating in her interests or in the interests of our party but, quite properly as a sensible Prime Minister, in the interests of the country, our people and our businesses. Will she confirm that that is the case?

**The Prime Minister:** I am happy to confirm that. It is important that this Government and I put the national interest first in the negotiations, and that is exactly what we are doing.
country into Hotel California: we can check out anytime we like, but we can never leave. When is she going to put workers, businesses and consumers first and, at the very least, look at a customs union between the United Kingdom and the EU?

The Prime Minister: We are putting the interests of people across the United Kingdom—workers, consumers and businesses—at the forefront of what we are doing. That is precisely why we have proposed a free trade area that includes frictionless trade.

James Cartlidge (South Suffolk) (Con): I entirely recognise the strong potential economic upside of being able to negotiate our own free trade deals, but surely we need to remember that the very same firms we would expect to invest into and benefit from those trade deals would be hit hard if friction on our border disrupted supply chains. Surely we have to get it right on both counts.

The Prime Minister: Yes. We want to ensure that we have a good trade relationship with the European Union. Our proposal has frictionless trade at its heart, but we will also get the benefit of those great trade deals around the rest of the world.

Lloyd Russell-Moyle (Brighton, Kemptown) (Lab/Co-op): The Prime Minister has come here today and failed to outline how her backstop is going to meet the impossible conditions of the ERG and the DUP. She is just going to act as their fall guy, is she not? Why does she not put herself out of her contortionist misery and put this question to a general election or to a third referendum, with remain as an option? [Interruption.]

Mr Speaker: Order. It is immensely stimulating to listen to the hon. Member for Mid Dorset and North Poole (Michael Tomlinson), but it is even more interesting to listen to the Prime Minister’s answer.

The Prime Minister: Thank you, Mr Speaker. I am not quite sure where a third referendum came from, but I refer the hon. Member for Brighton, Kemptown (Lloyd Russell-Moyle) to the answer I have given previously.

Chris Philp (Croydon South) (Con): The European Union’s negotiating position on the Irish backstop appears to imply that the only way it can believe we could avoid a hard border is by maintaining a customs union. Does the Prime Minister join me in rejecting that premise? There are two ways to avoid it: one was outlined in July’s White Paper; and the second is evident from studying the Swiss-French border, which crosses the customs union—there are different arrangements on the single market—where there is pretty much no infrastructure on most A-roads, barring a little French sign and a single camera of a kind seen on most high streets.

The Prime Minister: I do believe there is a way to ensure that we avoid a hard border between Northern Ireland and Ireland, and it is by having an arrangement with the European Union on frictionless trade—that is a customs arrangement that does not include us as part of the customs union.
Paul Masterton (East Renfrewshire) (Con): No sooner were rumours circulating at the weekend of a differentiated deal for Northern Ireland than the Scottish Government wanted in on the act. They want the same bespoke deal to apply to them, even though it would cause a hard border at Berwick. Is the Prime Minister absolutely clear that any new differences that are needed to make a frictionless border in Northern Ireland, beyond what already exist on an all-Ireland basis, will apply UK-wide and that we will leave together with one deal?

The Prime Minister: We are indeed working for a deal that ensures we leave the European Union as the whole United Kingdom. The circumstances of Northern Ireland having a land border with a country that will remain within the EU are different from those at Scotland. Of course, some checks already take place, for example, in relation to livestock moving between Great Britain and Northern Ireland. I cannot really believe that the Scottish Government or the Scottish National party want to impose those checks on livestock that would be moving from Scotland to northern England.

Trudy Harrison (Copeland) (Con): Can my right hon. Friend confirm that her plans mean we will leave the common agricultural policy?

The Prime Minister: Yes.

Mark Menzies (Fylde) (Con): The Prime Minister has an excellent record of standing up for the interests of Britain's defence workers, especially the 6,000 Eurofighter workers at Warton in my constituency. Will she impress upon our European counterparts the importance of doing a deal, because hundreds of thousands of jobs across Europe are at risk if they do not come to the table with her?

The Prime Minister: My hon. Friend makes a very important point. When we talk about the importance of frictionless trade, often the sector referred to is the automotive sector, but the aerospace industry also has a real interest in it, and we will continue to make the point about the importance of that frictionless trade.

Will Quince (Colchester) (Con): Will my right hon. Friend reconfirm that she would reject any plans or deal that would break up the United Kingdom or threaten our precious Union?

The Prime Minister: I am happy to give that commitment. That is precisely why we have been clear that we cannot accept the proposals that the European Union has put forward which would, in effect, mean a customs border down the Irish sea and so break Northern Ireland away from the rest of the UK.

Nigel Huddleston (Mid Worcestershire) (Con) rose—

Alex Chalk (Cheltenham) (Con) rose—

Stephen Kerr (Stirling) (Con) rose—

Mr Speaker: I call Nigel Huddleston.

Nigel Huddleston: Does the Prime Minister agree that compromise on both sides, whether in politics, business or any human relationship, does not mean giving in, giving up and being humiliated, but is a perfectly sensible and reasonable route to getting a mutually beneficial and desirable outcome?

The Prime Minister: Yes. By definition, negotiations mean both sides sit down, talking about the issues and coming to an agreement that both can accept. Very often, that does mean both sides having to accept some degree of compromise.

Stephen Kerr rose—

Mr Speaker: Mr Chalk, you seem to be losing your appetite—I hope not.

Alex Chalk: It is just because the question was asked so artfully before that I do not want to repeat it. May I repeat it, Mr Speaker? My right hon. Friend has made it clear that there is an impasse over the Northern Ireland backstop, but is she confident that with a constructive approach and good will on both sides it remains possible—and, indeed, it must be possible—to cut the Gordian knot?

The Prime Minister: Yes. I reassure my hon. Friend that I do believe it is possible for us to come to an agreement that meets our requirements, and I believe it is possible for us to achieve the good deal that we want to see for the UK.

Stephen Kerr: I think I have heard very clearly the Prime Minister state and restate that our precious Union is not up for negotiation, but will she rule out any increase in checks on trade flowing between Great Britain and Northern Ireland?

The Prime Minister: What we have put forward in relation to the backstop proposal is a mixture of a UK-wide and Northern Ireland-specific proposal which meets the constitutional settlement that we have for Northern Ireland. As we have already recognised, a limited number of checks already take place. What we want to ensure, as I said earlier, is that businesses in Northern Ireland are able to have that free and unfettered access to the rest of the UK internal market and, indeed, in the backstop arrangement, have that unfettered access to the European Union as well.
**Green GB Week and Clean Growth**

5.14 pm  

**The Minister for Energy and Clean Growth (Claire Perry):** With permission, Mr Speaker, I will make a statement to this House.

As the Prime Minister said earlier this year, the international determination to address climate change and deliver a cleaner future is one of the facts of our time and one of our greatest opportunities. Only this month, we had a reminder of the importance and urgency of our mission in the form of the publication of the Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change’s latest special report. The report’s conclusions are stark and sober. They show that we are not on track to cap global average temperature rises to below 2°C from pre-industrial levels, let alone to reach 1.5°C. The implications of this difference in warming are spelt out in the science: from flooding risk going up to fisheries going down; from extreme weather events to extinctions due to loss of habitat—serious, challenging and difficult outcomes. To mitigate against the impact of climate change, we need to understand how to best transform our energy generation, land use, transport systems, industrial processes, homes and buildings.

That is why, earlier today, I officially requested the advice of our UK independent advisers, the Committee on Climate Change, on the implications of the Paris agreement, and this latest IPCC report, for the UK’s long-term emissions reduction targets.

We are the first major industrial economy to seek such advice, which again reaffirms our determination to lead the world in this area. I have asked for this advice on when and how we could achieve a net zero target for our economy, including whether this is the right time to set such a target, and how reductions might be achieved across sectors in the most cost-effective way.

This request was the first event in our very first Green GB Week, which is designed to bring together businesses, government and civil society to celebrate the extensive cuts in emissions that we have achieved in the UK, and to open up the discussion about the challenges and opportunities from cleaner growth. The week involved tens of partner organisations, more than 100 events, and thousands of participants right across the UK.

No country other than the UK has done more to prove that action on climate change and economic growth can go hand in hand. Since 1990, we have led the G7 group of countries in cutting emissions and also in growing our economy. Since 2000, according to a recent report, the UK has cut emissions per unit of economic growth by an average of 3.7% a year—I know it is a bit technical, but the reduction of carbon for every unit of growth we deliver is how it is measured—which is well ahead of the G7 average of 2.2%. Last year, 2016-17, we achieved minus 4.7% compared with a global average of 2.6%.

This low carbon transition offers huge opportunities for the UK, which is why clean growth sits at the heart of our modern industrial strategy. It creates jobs. There are already more than 400,000 jobs in the UK’s low carbon economy, and this thriving sector could grow by 11% a year to 2030—four times faster than the rest of the economy. We are already seeing UK businesses leading the world. We have more offshore wind installed in the UK than any other country. Auction clearing prices for offshore wind have halved in the past two years, which is great news for industries and consumers alike, and this progress is opening up new markets from North America to South Korea.

In the first half of 2018, one in five of electric vehicles sold in Europe was made right here in the UK. In the service sector, the UK is consulting, and engineering firms are international leaders for global sustainable and low carbon projects. Since 2010, we have invested £52 billion in renewable energy projects in this country and the result is that we now generate more than half our electricity from low carbon sources—32% came from renewables in 2017.

We have committed more than £2.5 billion in Government investment in low carbon innovation in this Parliament, and we have galvanised action and initiative internationally, helping to secure the historic agreement of 195 countries to sign up to the Paris climate agreement. We have also established the Powering Past Coal Alliance, which has seen more than 70 countries, cities, states and businesses commit to transition away from coal power generation. We are leading from the front. In April this year, our power sector was entirely coal free for three days and we will phase out coal entirely from our power generation by 2025.

In the last seven years, we have delivered international climate finance to over 200 programmes in more than 75 countries, improving access to clean energy for over 17 million people and building the foundations for cleaner economic development in some of the poorest parts of the globe. Our progress to date is cause for celebration. I am proud to think of the UK—through successive Governments’ actions—as one of the greenest nations in the world. But while the world continues to deal with the implications of man-made climate change, we must not be complacent, and there is almost always more that we should be doing.

Today we publish our response to the annual progress report of the Committee on Climate Change, setting out what we have done since publishing our clean growth strategy this time last year and our next steps. The pace of innovation means that we cannot predict with certainty the most cost-effective path to our long-term carbon targets, but I can predict this: from how we travel to how we build our homes, we will need to make profound changes. Our strategy sets out some of the paths that we will need to take to do so.

This Government have set out the ambition to be the first to leave the environment in a better state than the one we inherited, but this must be consistent with strengthening our economy and providing opportunities for young people right across the country. Clean growth—which we are celebrating today and this week during the inaugural Green GB and Northern Ireland Week—can deliver all three, but to build on this success will require ongoing ambition and leadership from politicians right across the House, business, academia and civil society.

Ten years after the groundbreaking Climate Change Act 2008 was passed with almost unanimous support in this place, we want Green GB Week to bring the whole country together to celebrate the UK’s success and to set our ambitions for the future. Crucially, we need to understand that there are profound risks to our planet from uncontrolled warming, but that there are also huge opportunities in rising to this challenge. This Government are committed to maximising those opportunities. I commend this statement to the House.
Rebecca Long Bailey (Salford and Eccles) (Lab): I thank the Minister for advance sight of her statement today. I am pleased to be responding to the news that she has written to the Committee on Climate Change asking for advice on setting a date for achieving net zero greenhouse gas emissions. However, despite any good intentions she may have had in writing that letter, she must understand that Government policy is demonstrably incompatible with that goal.

First, investment in renewable energy has undergone what the Environmental Audit Committee refers to as a “dramatic and worrying collapse”—falling 56% in 2017. Changes in planning rules and Government funding since 2015 have seen the rate of deployment of new solar fall 95%, and planning applications for new onshore wind fall 94%. The Government now plan to remove support to small-scale renewables, which according to the Solar Trade Association, risks the almost total collapse of the industry. How is this compatible with net zero emissions?

Secondly, this Government and the last have sadly overseen a collapse in investment in energy efficiency, with Energy UK pointing to a 53% drop in investment between 2012 and 2015, an 80% reduction in improvement measures, and further declines projected to 2020. Again, how is this compatible with net zero emissions?

Thirdly, this Government have pursued a policy of fracking at any cost, overruling local planning decisions and reportedly even considering relaxing earthquake regulations. Shale gas can only be described as low carbon if it replaces coal in the energy mix, but coal is already on its way out of the UK’s energy mix, before fracking has even started. If shale gas were to come online now, it would be displacing genuinely low carbon energy, not coal. James Hansen, the former NASA scientist known as the father of climate science last week slammed this Government’s decision to pursue fracking as “aping” Donald Trump. What a terrible irony it is that the first day of Green Great Britain Week is the day that fracking is due to commence in Preston. How is this compatible with net zero emissions?

Fourthly, last week the Government announced that they are cutting the electric vehicle plug-in grant by £1,000—a move described by industry as “astounding”. Fifthly, according to the Committee on Climate Change, the Government are off course to meet existing carbon budgets, which are set with a view to achieving an 80% reduction in emissions by 2050. So I ask again: how is this compatible with meeting the more ambitious target of net zero emissions?

I believe that the answer to that question is contained within today’s letter to the Committee on Climate Change, in which the Minister describes carbon budgets 3 to 5, which run up to 2032, as “out of scope” of the referral. By effectively ruling out any additional action on climate change in the next 14 years, the Government seem to be asking the committee for advice but only in so far as they do not actually have to act on it. Unlike Labour’s plan to dramatically decarbonise energy supply and insulate 4 million homes as part of a green jobs revolution, the Government do not expect actually to implement any of the real measures needed to avert dangerous climate change. Sadly, without radical action from the Minister, she must realise that her Government’s vision for a green Great Britain is just a green washout.

Claire Perry: Is it not disappointing, on a day when we should be celebrating what politicians can come together to do, that the hon. Lady could not bring herself to do anything remotely cross-party?

I think the fundamental mistake that the hon. Lady and many other Labour Members make is that they confuse Government spending with results. We have seen a dramatic fall in the price of renewable energy, of solar panels and of energy efficiency measures, so thankfully we no longer need to make enormous subsidies with other people’s money in order to deploy the energy. In terms of the results, as I mentioned, we are now at 32% of renewables, and we had our first coal-free day. I know that the leader of her party, as long ago as 2015, was calling for reopening all the deep-east coal mines in the north-east and has said that he will rule out nuclear.

Jeremy Corbyn (Islington North) (Lab) indicated dissent.

Claire Perry: He has changed his policy now, but back then it was not at all obvious what it would be.

The hon. Lady knows that investment in this sector is very lumpy. We have brought forward some of the biggest offshore wind projects the world has ever seen. One would always expect that money to go up and down.

The hon. Lady talked about feed-in tariffs. We have spent nearly £5 billion in subsidising feed-in tariffs since 2010, and it has indeed worked. We are now seeing record levels of solar deployment. We signalled back in 2015 that we would be seeking to remove subsidy from the sector. We have had a call for evidence to see what we will replace that with, and I look forward to making some announcements on that shortly.

The hon. Lady is right that we all need to do more on energy efficiency. That is why we have set out the most challenging targets the country has ever seen in order to improve efficiency both in our homes and in our other buildings.

The hon. Lady talked about shale gas. I find it amazing that so many Labour Front Benchers will take the shilling of the GMB union but will not take its advice on shale gas extraction. They are claiming that this does not create jobs; the union fundamentally disagrees with them. They claim that it is not consistent with a low carbon future. The Committee on Climate Change has said that it is entirely consistent with our measures. When they go home tonight to cook their tea, I ask them to think about what fuel they are going to use, because we know that 70% of the country relies on gas for cooking and heating. We have a choice. On current projections, we are going to move from importing about half our gas to importing almost 75% of it, even with usage falling, as it needs to go forward. I know that some Labour Members would love us to be spending more hard currency with Russia, but I am quite keen to soberly—[Interruption.] Perhaps if Labour Front Benchers would all like to stop mansplaining I could actually make some progress. I would like to answer the hon. Lady’s questions without a whole load of chuntering as if I am the referee at Chelsea.

As I was saying, the challenge on shale is that we do use gas. We want to rapidly decarbonise gas as we will continue to do. This is entirely consistent with all our low carbon pathways. It is even consistent with the hon. Lady’s proposals for the renewable economy, because
Claire Perry: I pay tribute to my right hon. Friend’s long-standing work in campaigning and his ministerial work on the whole question of environmental sustainability. He is quite right that we are well ahead of our EU counterparts in decarbonising our economy. I was at the European Council on Monday, where we debated our emissions reduction targets. The Road to Zero is a very ambitious programme of emissions reductions, and we were among a handful of nations pushing for maximum ambition on reducing CO₂ emissions from cars and vans. We should continue to do that regardless of the technical rearrangements of our relationship with the EU, because when it comes to carbon, we are so much stronger working together.

John McNally (Falkirk) (SNP): I thank the Minister for advance sight of her statement and agree with her wholeheartedly that profound changes are needed and that more needs to be done. As a member of the Environmental Audit Committee, I share the concerns that it has raised.

It is surely obvious to all that we need to rebalance the economy urgently towards sustainable energy, sustainable business and sustainable manufacturing. However, what is the point in the UK Government launching a Green GB and NI Week at the same time as they are prioritising nuclear over renewables and dragging their heels on climate emissions reductions? Actions speak louder than words. I think the Minister recognises that we are at a privileged moment in time, with most of the world crying out for change.

Will the Minister match the Scottish Government’s world-leading statutory climate targets of reductions of 56%, 66% and 78% by 2020, 2030 and 2040, as well as 90% by 2050? Will she tell the Government to stop dragging their feet and to use reserved powers, including subsidies and technology support, that would allow Scotland to achieve net zero emissions sooner? Will she tell the Government to deliver their green obligations by scrapping plans for new and expensive nuclear power plants and instead bring back renewable subsidies and the oil and gas sector by aiding the low carbon transition, give Peterhead the £1 billion for a new carbon capture facility that it had expected and restore long-term certainty of policy to the whole sector?

Claire Perry: The hon. Gentleman makes some very good points. I am pleased to pay tribute to the work of his Committee, and indeed to the work of the Scottish Government and the other devolved Administrations in contributing to our world-leading climate targets. We do of course score our CO₂ emissions on a UK-wide basis.

The hon. Gentleman raised some important questions. He will of course know that UK energy policy is set in Westminster. Many of the subsidies that have been paid for—indeed, they have brought forward much of the renewables deployment in Scotland—have been set on a UK-wide tax basis. I do not think we should be bringing back renewables subsidies, as he called for, as we are getting to a point at which we no longer need to do so.

We opened the world’s first subsidy-free solar farm last year, and we are of course buying offshore wind at very low rates.

I think we do have to work together. It is fantastic for all the Governments—I would expect the same of local authorities and Mayors of combined authorities—to set their own targets because there are so many levers
that can be pulled on the ground, not least to motivate people and to motivate businesses to change the way in which they carry out their activities.

Rachel Maclean (Redditch) (Con): Does the Minister welcome, as I do, the fact that recent research indicates that two thirds of millennials are looking for green jobs? What more can the Government do to encourage this very welcome news?

Claire Perry: I do welcome that, and it was my Department that conducted the research. There is a myth that we do not have many green jobs, as we already have 400,000 in the economy. On the basis of our current work, we think that the number could grow to almost 2 million. One of the reasons why so many large companies are changing the way they do business is that they think they have a bit of a recruitment crisis, because they know that so many young people would much rather work for a sustainable company than otherwise. Indeed, Thursday of Green GB Week is all about opportunities: how people can get into this business; and how we can motivate the next generation—from schoolchildren up to young adults—to think about working in what will be one of our great long-term growth areas.

Sir Edward Davey (Kingston and Surbiton) (LD): The Minister's green words are great, but back on planet Earth the reality is somewhat different. What happened to the huge leap forward that Britain had with green power until recently? Does she think the present huge decline in renewables investment is anything to do with the Government? There is the ban on onshore wind, for example. How does she square that mad policy with the climate change challenge?

Claire Perry: Again, it is a bit sad to hear that from someone with whom I was very proud to work in coalition and who did so much in this area. I would unpick two of the right hon. Gentleman's points. First, there is no slowdown. Renewables usage is absolutely accelerating, and we are now at 32%—[Interruption.] Again, if we combine more for less as prices fall, why are we falling into the trap of defining success as how much we are spending rather than how much we are getting? We are getting 32% from renewables. That, along with the investment in new gas, is the reason why we are able to phase out coal.

The right hon. Gentleman raised the question of banning. There is no ban on offshore wind. In fact, he was the Minister who led so many of the fights about offshore wind farms. Frankly, those fights threatened to derail many of the conversations about clean growth, because they were so terribly controversial. [HON. MEMBERS: "Onshore wind!"] There is no ban on onshore wind. Onshore wind is still operating. What we were elected on in our manifesto—the Government's manifesto—was that we did not think large-scale onshore wind development was right for England, and I am afraid I believe in carrying out our manifesto commitments.

Mark Menzies (Fylde) (Con): I urge my right hon. Friend not to take any lectures from the Labour party when it comes to shale gas, because it was under the Labour party that the current licensing round for the shale gas that is being fracked today was issued. May I urge her to continue to put in place the relevant safety measures and environmental protections, as this Government have done, which were not there when the Labour party issued the licence round?

Claire Perry: I thank my hon. Friend for sharing that information with us. He is absolutely right. One of the reasons for believing that we can safely extract shale gas is that we have the strongest environmental standards in the world when it comes to oil and gas extraction. We believe that we may, indeed, need to continue to strengthen them.

However, is it not interesting? My hon. Friend has dealt with the brunt of a lot of the protests against the shale site to which we have granted a licence, and I was very disappointed to see the hon. Member for Salford and Eccles (Rebecca Long Bailey) having a bit of a chit-chat with the protesters without bothering to go into the site to see its potential and the number of jobs that could be created by that vital industry.

Kerry McCarthy (Bristol East) (Lab): As an electric car driver myself, I would point out to the Minister that the growth of electric cars means it is more imperative to invest in charging infrastructure, because it is pretty difficult at the moment to find a charging point that is not already being used. However, on the broader point, we are now talking about trying to move from a target of 80% in 2050 to net zero. Can she name one new thing she is doing, rather than going backwards, that will help us to meet that goal?

Claire Perry: I again have to commend the hon. Lady's long-standing and non-virtue-signalling commitment in this area; she is one of the few people who takes the advice on diet. I would love to know about electric charging stations between Bristol and London, because I will hopefully be making that transition shortly.

The hon. Lady is right, however. One of the key things that came out of the IPCC report, and will come forward, is that we may overshoot. What are we going to do about that? What are the technologies that will help us get back under 2°? We are one of the first Governments in the world to invest substantially in greenhouse gas removal technologies. I am not saying that that is the answer—I would not want to go there, and I would rather change—but if we have to pull CO₂ out of the air or somehow get it out of the ecosystem, we will be one of the first Governments who are able to do that. That is something—[Interruption.] Well, I am afraid we need to consider it, and that is what the IPCC and the CCC have advised us to do.

Rebecca Pow (Taunton Deane) (Con): First, I commend my right hon. Friend on the advances she is making in asking when and how we might reach a net zero carbon economy, because that laudable endeavour fits entirely with the Government's moves to leave the environment in a better place than we found it in. However, does she agree that reducing our greenhouse emissions need not come at the expense of growing the economy, because we can invest in new technologies to achieve that? That would cut our energy bills, reduce emissions and increase efficiency. All those things were covered by my recent ten-minute rule Bill, and my right hon. Friend was extremely supportive of it.
Claire Perry: Indeed I was. The idea that we need a jolly good recession to get emissions down is not in any way appealing, and I hope there is cross-party consensus on that. We of course need to grow in a sustainable way, but in pursuing this opportunity for the UK and to help the world, there is an absolutely immense and incredible opportunity to create jobs, prosperity and growth right across the UK. It is a complete win-win situation, which is why we should be pursuing it, and are pursuing it, so vigorously.

David Hanson (Delyn) (Lab): Is it still the Minister’s plan to end the export tariff on new solar installations from April next year? If so, what assessment has she made of the impact on the solar industry?

Claire Perry: The right hon. Gentleman raises an important point. He will know that the signalling of the ending of the current tariffs was done several years ago. He will also know that we have just had a call for evidence, and I am reviewing that information. I will come back to the House shortly with proposals on those policies.

Luke Graham (Ochil and South Perthshire) (Con): Does my right hon. Friend agree that reducing greenhouse gases need not come at the expense of growing the economy? Will she continue to make available funds for innovative energy sources such as geothermal energy from the projects currently being explored in Clackmannanshire in my constituency?

Claire Perry: My hon. Friend has already made a powerful case for investment in geothermal. In many constituencies, we have old mine workings and we have some pockets with natural currents of geothermal—the hon. Member for Southampton, Test (Dr Whitehead) has worked hard on that in the past. We do have some opportunities to extract relatively warm water and to use it for district heating. Indeed, one of the announcements I made today was about how we are going to bring forward some of the competitions to improve the way we collect waste heat and potentially reuse it. The projects in hon. Friend’s constituency are interesting, and I am sure he will continue to make strong representations about them.

Diana Johnson (Kingston upon Hull North) (Lab): In terms of joined-up Government, I wonder whether the Minister has had an opportunity to discuss Clean GB Week with the Transport Secretary, who seems to be merrily cancelling rail electrification schemes in favour of polluting bimodal trains.

Claire Perry: I think that is a little unfair, because the bimodal trains that have been put in place have substantially lower CO₂ emissions than the diesels they are replacing. The hon. Lady will know better than most the economic benefit that can come from this clean growth transition, because she has the new Siemens wind turbine factory in her constituency, creating many relatively well-paid, highly productive jobs, and we want to see a lot more of that.

In terms of the transport industry, I am very struck that, in Europe, we are able to push at the maximum envelope for ambition because of our “Road to Zero” strategy. We are pushing the envelope when it comes to transport emissions.

Sir Desmond Swayne (New Forest West) (Con): Aside from cutting the emission of hot air in this Chamber, we can do a number of things individually. Will the Department be issuing advice to nudge us in the right direction?

Claire Perry: If my right hon. Friend has a moment to go on to the fantastic Green GB Week website, he will find 10 things that he and local businesses in his constituency can do, ranging from test driving electric vehicles to upgrading heating controls and understanding where his pension is invested. If he wants to signal the importance of this transition, he should make sure that his investments are in a pension plan that is not investing in unsustainable businesses. There are many things he can do and I would love to hear back from him about which ones he does.

Mr Speaker: I trust that the right hon. Gentleman will be accessing the said website within a matter of minutes, if not indeed seconds.

Sir Desmond Swayne indicated assent.

Mr Speaker: The right hon. Gentleman is nodding in a way that is encouraging.

Mr Paul Sweeney (Glasgow North East) (Lab/Co-op): Many of my constituents, as well as thousands of people across the country, have been subject to mis-selling under the Government’s green deal scheme, which was launched in 2013. Many are still paying the price and are thousands of pounds in debt. What will the Government do to compensate them and address the long-standing toxic legacy of the green deal scheme?

Claire Perry: There are examples of mis-selling—and, indeed, under the current energy company obligation scheme. There is the usual redress through consumer channels, which hopefully the hon. Gentleman’s constituents know about. If he has specific cases he would like me to take up, I would be happy to look at them. I am working with a number of MPs. The Government do not step in—this was always a third-party scheme—but we do have an ombudsman in the green deal finance sector. It is important that whatever responsibilities and rights are there are used for the benefit of all our constituents.

Paul Masterton (East Renfrewshire) (Con): I was delighted to mark the launch of Green GB Week up at Whitelee wind farm in Eaglesham, the largest onshore wind farm in the UK, to which my right hon. Friend has an open invitation any time she can fit it into her schedule. Does she agree that Green GB Week is not just about recognising how far we have come, but recommitting ourselves to where we want to get to, and, most importantly, how we want to get there, such as by committing to this as part of our industrial strategy?

Claire Perry: When we talk about climate change, it can seem like an incredibly powerful threat that we are all completely powerless to deal with, but that is simply not true. We have already cut our emissions by 30-odd per cent. since 1990. In fact, the last time emissions were as low as this in the UK, Queen Victoria was on the throne. We can do it and we can lead the world in doing it, but there is no complacency. We are not doing this to
give ourselves a birthday cake and a pat on the back. We are doing this because we think there is much more opportunity, and we can push the world to go further by showing that it is possible.

Thangam Debbonaire (Bristol West) (Lab): May I gently invite the Minister to come share a meal with me at some point? I say that because I wish to encourage her, after promising to consider using an electric vehicle, to go one further and consider a meat-free day every week. Alternatives to meat are available; there is a very tasty meat-free “chicken” stir-fry in my fridge right now. This is not something we have to do every day. She is very welcome to come and try out what going meat-free would involve. The serious point is that going meat-free or reducing the amount of meat we eat one day a week makes a huge contribution to reducing our emissions.

Mr Speaker: I feel rather excluded from this generous invitation.

Claire Perry: I would enjoy the hon. Lady’s company. As I said this morning, I am not trying to sell cookery books. We are here to set out some sober and serious policies. She makes an important point and I know that many people have made it. I am also very mindful of the farming community. If people are eating meat, they should look for locally sourced meat that is raised to the highest ethical welfare standards. We should all have a healthy diet, because it reduces the burden overall. Perhaps she can bring me in a takeaway version of one her specialties at some point.

Mr Philip Hollobone (Kettering) (Con): In the borough of Kettering, 150 GWh of renewable electricity is generated every year, which is enough to power all 38,000 homes in the borough. Will the Energy Minister hail Kettering as one of this country’s greenest boroughs and use it as an example to encourage others to do the same?

Claire Perry: It is great to see a Kettering green GB champion on our Benches. My hon. Friend is right: so many of our communities are living this process. It is not some scary existential threat. People are living it. They experience renewable energy—or not—and do not see it as a huge imposition. So many of our towns and communities are committing to these sorts of sustainable initiatives. That is part of Green GB Week, so that people can come together, learn from one another and, frankly, get a pat on the back for some of the things that they have done.

Drew Hendry (Inverness, Nairn, Badenoch and Strathspey) (SNP): The Minister rightly mentioned the need to use innovation and new technology in rising to this challenge, yet her statement had not one mention of carbon capture and storage, which is considered vital to reach the Paris treaty targets. Norway is pushing ahead. Germany is planning this along the Rhine. Does she regret the £1 billion betrayal of Peterhead and will she commit to restoring CCS funding levels to 2015 levels?

Claire Perry: The hon. Gentleman and I have had exchanges on this. He knows that we have committed £100 million from our current budget to invest in carbon capture, usage and storage technology. That money is being spent. We are working with several industrial clusters to work out how we decarbonise the power and get industry to put its emissions in there. Frankly, I was not the Minister at the time of the project’s cancellation, but we were going to spend £1 billion on decarbonising coal, which we no longer want in our mix at all, and we had not thought at all about how we would get industries in this area to put their emissions in. Since the pause of that competition, we have spent more than £300 million investigating our aquifers. They are the best in the world—offshore—and we will continue to explore how to do this in the most cost-effective way.

Mr Philip Dunne (Ludlow) (Con): I applaud my right hon. Friend’s initiative. First, with her announcement today, the Government are one of the first around the world to respond to the IPCC report, and secondly, she has taken the initiative of Green GB Week to provide more focus on this country’s achievements—it is leading the world—in developing clean growth. I encourage her to get her officials to come up with a rather more snappy means of demonstrating the metrics used to show that we can grow the economy and renewable energy at the same time. If I might give her a pointer in that regard, will she please work more closely with Ofgem to encourage pre-accreditation for anaerobic digestion plants, which will shortly run out of time to get installed to take advantage of the feed-in tariffs?

Claire Perry: My hon. Friend is the definition of “snappy”, so I will always take his advice on how to spice up any of these visuals. He is right that the way to make this acceptable is to make it visual and easy for people to understand. There is some very good stuff on the Green GB Week website, which I encourage him to look at. I will take away his point about pre-certification and perhaps we can discuss it at a separate time.

Anna McMorrin (Cardiff North) (Lab): I am not going to congratulate the Minister on a letter. Action on this is long overdue. Scientific advice to the UK has been very clear. It tests political and policy consensus and hard decisions will have to be made. Is she ready, and crucially, does she have the influence across the Government to deliver? When will she start focusing on the cheap, tried and tested form of renewable technology—onsshore wind?

Claire Perry: We benefit from a lot of experience in this House and the hon. Lady has more than many in this area. Even though I could not get her to congratulate us, I am always very willing to listen to her thoughts on this issue. Two things are important. The clean growth strategy was the first cross-Government document we have ever published that set out in detail how we plan to decarbonise all sections of the economy. And, it was very lovely that the Prime Minister asked me to attend Cabinet, albeit at what I call “the kids’ end of the table”—it demonstrated that this is fundamentally part of the Government’s plan going forward. So yes, we are up for the challenge. We do not underestimate it and it will be a cross-Government initiative, as the hon. Lady can see and as we are delivering.

Neil Parish (Tiverton and Honiton) (Con): I very much welcome this statement on green growth. With green growth, can we make sure that we concentrate on
electric cars, electric buses and electric taxis so that we can get better air quality in our inner cities, especially in the 43 spots across the country where we really do need to improve air quality, so that we have a greener Britain?

Claire Perry: My hon. Friend, in his capacity as Chair of the Environment, Food and Rural Affairs Select Committee, knows very well that what is referred to as the “co-benefit” of cutting emissions also means better air quality, better human health and better child outcomes, in terms of reduced asthma levels. We did not think about that before, but now we are, and luckily we can understand those things and work out the costs and benefits, taking into account some of these new measures.

Chris Elmore (Ogmore) (Lab): The Minister has made decisions now around scrapping the tidal lagoon project and rejecting her own commissioned report. We need to move on from that. What is her plan now for introducing tidal energy across the UK and making sure that south Wales is given the investment it was promised by the Conservative Government?

Claire Perry: The hon. Gentleman will know that we have spent tens of millions of pounds looking at wave energy—we have Wave Hub off the coast of Cornwall and we have invested substantially in many of the trial sites. As we debated at the time, the problem with the Swansea lagoon was not the source of power per se, but the fact that it was the most expensive power station proposal we had ever had in the UK, and it is right that we care about taxpayers’ money. That said, we are always interested in looking at tidal: several other proposals have been brought forward, and the door is always open. I, like him, know the power of the Bristol channel, having grown up on the other side; the problem is having grown up on the other side; the problem is openness. I, like him, know the power of the Bristol channel, having grown up on the other side; the problem is having grown up on the other side; the problem is openness.

Craig Mackinlay (South Thanet) (Con): My right hon. Friend will be aware that businesses that do the right thing and install solar panels for electricity generation for their own use face a revaluation of business rates, which results in a higher charge, but that they do not face such a revaluation if the energy generation is for provision into the standard domestic grid. Will she commit to working with the Treasury to solve this somewhat unintelligible inequity?

Claire Perry: The short answer is yes. I would point out, however, that there are companies making substantial investments in solar—Rolls-Royce, for example—that absolutely see its value and see it as part of their whole energy-balancing process. So this is happening, but my hon. Friend makes a good point.

Steve McCabe (Birmingham, Selly Oak) (Lab): I commend the Minister’s aims, but surely one easy way to pursue a clean growth strategy would be for the Government to require all new builds to include some form of solar energy panel in their design, apart from in the handful of situations where technical problems preclude it.

Claire Perry: Whether solar, some other form of renewable energy or just improving energy efficiency, all were set out in the clean growth strategy. One of our aims is to get new homes built off the gas grid—there are 42,000 homes off the grid in my constituency—not to have fossil fuel heating from 2025. We intend to do that not only because we want to reduce emissions but because it will boost routes to market for some of our world-leading renewable heat technology.

Mr Simon Clarke (Middlesbrough South and East Cleveland) (Con) rose—

Mr Speaker: I call Mr Simon Clarke.

Mr Clarke: Thank you, Mr Speaker. I was looking particularly beseechéingly there.

I thank the Minister for her statement. She is a great champion of growing our economy while also protecting our environment. Last week, I was proud to go to Downing Street with the hon. Member for Wakefield (Mary Creagh) to present a letter from 130 colleagues from across the House setting out our shared commitment to supporting the Government in the event that they decided to pursue net zero. Does the Minister recognise the strength of feeling across the Chamber that we must do everything in our power to limit the rise in global warming to 1.5°C and that net zero is the key to this?

Claire Perry: I thank my hon. Friend. Friend and the other MPs for that challenge and their support. Ultimately—forget the political banter—we are the House that will have to agree these policy decisions, justify the spending to our constituents and help to communicate to them the opportunities that are there. I urge him to look at the Green GB website. There are masses of events in his area over the week, for students, businesses, local authorities and the like. There is lots of good stuff we can use to spread this important message.

Alex Sobel (Leeds North West) (Lab/Co-op): The Minister has written to the UK Committee on Climate Change, but that committee has written to her twice saying she is failing to meet our Paris commitments, which it is important that we meet. When I was on Leeds City Council, we put 1,000 solar roofs on council housing. We cannot do that now without the subsidies. On cars, again she has cut the subsidies. Why not consider changes to subsidies for new hydrogen technologies for both heating and transport?

Claire Perry: The hon. Gentleman, in his former role as a councillor—and, indeed, Leeds City Council—did amazing work on one of the really big challenges, which is decarbonising heat. As he will know, some of those heat projects are proceeding thanks to Government investment. In fact, a project up in the north-west involving Keele University is going live, blending hydrogen into the heat network. We are innovating, and are doing so in a way that could completely change the methods through which we heat our homes over the next 20 years. However, this is not just about subsidy. The Government cannot do this all on their own, while putting the burden on taxpayers. We must leverage in private industry, and we must work out the most cost-effective way to deliver our aim so that we can keep bills down.

James Heappey (Wells) (Con): The key to a decentralised smart energy system is people installing generation not for the purpose of selling to the grid, but to meet their own needs. Does my right hon. Friend agree that the way to make all that happen is to encourage people to
install the storage, the electrified heat, the electric vehicles and all the other facilities that will help them to consume the power that they generate on their premises?

Claire Perry: Indeed, and they should also be encouraged to install the smart meters that can join everything up and show them where the energy generation and export are coming from. We are seeing more and more of that, and we are supporting many of those investments through our innovation funding. Decentralised energy generation and energy balancing are a big part of the future.

Gavin Newlands (Paisley and Renfrewshire North) (SNP): As one who represents the constituency with the greatest number of green deal mis-selling cases, I think that the Minister’s answer to the hon. Member for Glasgow North East (Mr Sweeney) was nowhere near good enough. The shameful mis-selling by Home Energy & Lifestyle Management Ltd of UK Government-backed green deal products has cost potentially hundreds of thousands of pounds in my constituency alone, but so far the Government have shamefully washed their hands of any responsibility. When will they do the right thing and fund a compensation scheme for all those affected?

Claire Perry: I refer the hon. Gentleman to my earlier answer. The scheme was employed in the private sector. Does the hon. Gentleman want to listen, or does he want to keep shouting? There are obviously risks to consumers, and, as I also said to the hon. Member for Glasgow North East (Mr Sweeney), I should be happy to sit down and have a conversation to see whether we can do more to make the current statutory powers more effective.

Trudy Harrison (Copeland) (Con): Does my right hon. Friend agree that nuclear will play a vital role in securing a low carbon future for this country? Does she think that we could keep the lights on if we stopped using it, as the Leader of the Opposition would like us to?

Claire Perry: My hon. Friend is a doughty campaigner. She has seen the benefits of nuclear locally and understands its international importance. We need a diverse energy mix, and that means making good decisions. It was very sad to see this reported in the Financial Times:

“In private, Jeremy is against, as is the majority of the shadow cabinet, but no one wants to put Rebecca in an awkward position.”

I feel terribly sorry for the hon. Member for Salford and Eccles. Dealing with that level of ideology cannot be easy. However, this Government can be trusted to deliver ideology-free energy policy that keeps the lights on and bills down.

Steve Double (St Austell and Newquay) (Con): As my right hon. Friend will know, along with the Minister for Disabled People, Health and Work, my hon. Friend the Member for Truro and Falmouth (Sarah Newton), I have been a champion of the potential of geothermal energy in Cornwall. Although progress has been frustrating, we are very excited to be on the verge of seeing test drilling. Does my right hon. Friend agree that geothermal energy has the potential to play a significant role in the delivery of clean renewable energy in this country, and will she back its development in Cornwall?

Claire Perry: I think that that is an incredibly important challenge. How amazing it is that the economic opportunity created so many years ago by the removal of all the various minerals there can now give us the potential to decarbonise our heat and to generate more jobs in my hon. Friend’s beautiful constituency.

Mr Speaker: I am extremely grateful to the Minister for her statement.
Loneliness Strategy

Mr Speaker: Before I call the Under-Secretary of State for Digital, Culture, Media and Sport, the hon. Member for Chatham and Aylesford (Tracey Crouch), to make the next statement, let me say that I know the House will appreciate the significance of its subject, the loneliness strategy. More particularly, Members across the House will remember with great respect that the late Jo Cox prioritised this issue and set about its pursuit, as she did in respect of all her activity, with a crusading zeal that we all immensely admired.

I know that colleagues will want to bear that in mind today, as well as the fact that Jo’s sister, Kim, and Jo’s parents, Jean and Gordon—the Leadbeater trio, if I may so describe them, whom it has been my privilege to meet and to admire for their extraordinary stoicism, fortitude, dignity and love—are listening. My friends—I think the House regards you as friends—we are proud to see you, and what the Minister is going to address is done not least in the name of, and with everlasting respect for, Jo.

6.5 pm

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Digital, Culture, Media and Sport (Tracey Crouch): I should like to make a statement on the publication of the Government’s landmark strategy to tackle loneliness.

This is a very emotional statement to make. I am standing here at the Dispatch Box with a clear line of sight to the coat of arms representing our colleague standing here at the Dispatch Box with a clear line of sight to the coat of arms representing our colleague

Mr Speaker: Before I call the Under-Secretary of State for Digital, Culture, Media and Sport, the hon. Member for Chatham and Aylesford (Tracey Crouch), to make the next statement, let me say that I know the House will appreciate the significance of its subject, the loneliness strategy. More particularly, Members across the House will remember with great respect that the late Jo Cox prioritised this issue and set about its pursuit, as she did in respect of all her activity, with a crusading zeal that we all immensely admired.

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The Jo Cox Commission on Loneliness was set up with a vision to carry forward her important work, and in January the Prime Minister welcomed its report and many of its recommendations, including the appointment of a cross-Government ministerial lead on loneliness, a post which I was overwhelmingly humbled to be offered. I would like to take this opportunity to thank in particular the hon. Member for Leeds West (Rachel Reeves) and my hon. Friend the Member for South Ribble (Seema Kennedy) for their vital work as co-chairs of the commission. Their dedication and passion have been essential in leading and driving forward action, and I am personally grateful to them for the cross-party support they have given me since I have taken on this work.

Since then, our work in the UK has gained global attention. Loneliness is increasingly recognised as one of the most pressing public health issues we face across the world. Feeling lonely is linked to early death, with its impact often cited as being on a par with that of smoking or obesity. It is also linked to an increased risk of heart disease, stroke, depression, cognitive decline and even Alzheimer’s.

It is estimated that between 5% and 18% of adults in the UK feel lonely often or always, but they are frequently hard to reach and suffer in silence. The Government are committed to confronting this challenge. The strategy published today outlines the Government’s vision for England to tackle loneliness, complementing the work being done in the devolved Administrations, and creating a place where we all have strong social relationships, where families, friends and communities support each other, where organisations promote people’s social connections as a core part of their everyday role, where loneliness can be recognised and acted on without stigma or shame, and where we can all make an effort to look out for each other and ensure that moments of contact are respectful and meaningful.

To get there requires society-wide change, which is why the strategy recognises that Government cannot make the necessary changes alone. It sets out a powerful vision of how we can all play a role in building a more socially connected society. But there is no quick fix to achieving this vision, so it is very much a starting point rather than the end. It largely concentrates on the role Government can play and how we can set the framework to enable local authorities, businesses, health and the voluntary sector, as well as communities and individuals, to support people’s social connections. But it also describes the important responsibilities that we all have as individuals to our family, friends and communities and gives some examples of the great work already under way across the country to create strong and connected communities. It is a cross-Government programme, rather than a programme of one Department, and sets out a number of policy commitments ranging across policy areas such as health, employment, transport and housing and planning, and I am pleased that so many of my colleagues involved in the strategy are sitting alongside me on the Treasury Bench this evening.

I wish briefly to draw five areas to the attention of the House. The strategy sets out a commitment to improve and expand social prescribing across England. It is estimated that GPs see between one and five patients a day because of loneliness. This is a policy that has been very much developed in response to some of the brilliant work by the Royal College of General Practitioners, frontline health professionals and others, and it will change the way patients experiencing loneliness are treated.

Social prescribing connects people to community groups and services through the support of link workers, who introduce people to support based on their individual needs. By 2023, the Government will support all local health and care systems to implement social prescribing connector schemes across the whole country. In addition, the Government will explore how a variety of organisations, such as jobcentres, community pharmacies and social workers, refer people into social prescribing schemes and test how to improve this. The Government will also work with local authorities to pilot and test how the better use of data can help to make it easier for people to find local activities, services and support.

The Government will also grow a network of employers to take action on loneliness, working with the Campaign to End Loneliness. The Government strategy includes a pilot with Royal Mail and sets out details of a new pledge that employers can sign up to, demonstrating their commitment to helping their employees to tackle loneliness. I am really pleased that a number of businesses and organisations have signed up, including Sainsbury’s, the Co-op, National Grid and the British Red Cross, along with 18 or so others, as well as the UK Government civil service.

Earlier this summer, we announced that £20 million of funding would be made available from the Government and other partners to support initiatives to connect people.
In the strategy today, I am pleased to announce that a further £1.8 million will be made available to support even more community spaces and used to transform underutilised areas, including creating new community cafes, art spaces or gardens.

Furthermore, the Government will build a national conversation to raise awareness of loneliness and reduce the stigma. We will explore how best to drive awareness of the importance of social health and how we can encourage people to take action. In addition, Public Health England’s forthcoming campaign on mental health will explicitly highlight the importance of social connections to our wider wellbeing.

Finally, the strategy sets out the Government’s ongoing commitment to this agenda. The ministerial group that steered development of the strategy will continue to meet to oversee the Government’s work on tackling loneliness. The group will publish an annual progress report. My ministerial colleagues in the group, from the Ministry of Housing, Communities and Local Government, the Department for Transport and the Department for Business, Energy and Industrial Strategy, will have their portfolios extended to include loneliness, to show the importance of the agenda across a wide range of policy areas. My colleague at the Department of Health and Social Care, who already has loneliness in her portfolio, will also continue to provide invaluable support on this work.

The Government’s intention is to embed consideration of loneliness and relationships throughout the policy-making process. From next year, individual Government Departments will highlight the progress they are making on addressing loneliness through their annual single departmental plans. The Government will also explore other mechanisms for ensuring that loneliness is considered in policy making, including through adding loneliness to the guidance for the family test.

The Government strategy is a significant first step in the national mission to end loneliness in our lifetimes. An enormous number of people, organisations, voluntary groups and others have helped to produce the strategy; the list published in the strategy of my thanks extends to four pages, so I cannot mention them all here. As there is no way they would have written it into the speech or the strategy themselves, I would like to place on the record a huge thank you to the team of officials, the Ministerial Group, has inspired and helped to shape today’s announcement.

The Minister is right to say that the Government cannot tackle loneliness on their own. It is a social ill, and it requires social action to end it, but the Government certainly have a role in facilitating, engaging and supporting groups who can help. Too often, however, we see the Government ignoring the impact of their decisions on people experiencing loneliness or on the organisations best placed to tackle it—I presume that that is why we are now seeing a group of Ministers assembled to look into the issue—and they will certainly have to change their approach if we are going to see the real difference that we all want to see in tackling loneliness.

The Minister referred to local government, which is certainly a key partner in this agenda, but cuts to local government since 2010 mean that councils are facing a £7.8 billion shortfall by 2025. Councils have lost 60% of their funding since 2010, with a further £1.3 billion in cuts due over the next year. Those cuts have already led to the closure of 428 day centres, 1,000 children’s centres, 600 youth centres and 478 public libraries, and we have also seen cuts in funding for countless lunch clubs, befriending services, local voluntary groups and community centres. Those are all places and services that have a role to play in tackling loneliness.

I welcome the Minister’s statement, and am grateful to her for advance sight of it. Loneliness is one of the great social ills of our age, and the Government are right to put forward a strategy to tackle it. It is encouraging to see Ministers representing so many Departments and committing to ensure that the strategy makes a difference.

Loneliness affects people of all ages: disabled people who are unable to get out of the house; older people who lose friends, become housebound, and feel they lack purpose in their lives; young people moving away for work or education; teenagers coping with the challenges of growing up; and people who lose their jobs. It can affect any of us and all of us, and it can have a devastating effect on people’s mental and physical health.

The Minister was right to observe that this is an emotional moment, because we are all of course thinking about our former colleague, Jo Cox, who set up the Commission on Loneliness before she was so tragically taken from us. She said:

“I will not live in a country where thousands of people are living lonely lives, forgotten by the rest of us”.

She recognised that loneliness does not discriminate between young and old, and that it can affect anyone at any time. Jo’s commission set out to find a way forward, and we all echo the Minister’s generous and heartfelt tribute to her. I would also like to recognise the outstanding work of my hon. Friend the Member for Leeds West (Rachel Reeves) and the hon. Member for South Ribble (Seema Kennedy), who have taken Jo’s work forward as co-chairs of the Jo Cox Commission on Loneliness. Their work, together with that of many charities and community organisations, has inspired and helped to shape today’s announcement.

The Minister is right to say that the Government cannot tackle loneliness on their own. It is a social ill, and it requires social action to end it, but the Government certainly have a role in facilitating, engaging and supporting groups who can help. Too often, however, we see the Government ignoring the impact of their decisions on people experiencing loneliness or on the organisations best placed to tackle it—I presume that that is why we are now seeing a group of Ministers assembled to look into the issue—and they will certainly have to change their approach if we are going to see the real difference that we all want to see in tackling loneliness.

I applaud the Minister for saying on television this morning that she was not there to defend cuts made in the past, and I know that she shares my concern about the impact of difficult decisions on services that we all care about. What assessment has she made, in order to get things right in the future, of the impact of ongoing Government cuts to local government and community services to tackle loneliness? She is also right to talk
positively about the role of civil society in tackling loneliness, yet Government cuts since 2010 have had a significant impact on voluntary and community organisations. Funding cuts already planned for the coming year will lead to further cuts to the voluntary sector. On top of that, we now have the uncertainty associated with Brexit, as we heard from the Prime Minister this afternoon. What assessment has the Minister made of the impact of the loss of EU funding for services in the voluntary sector that support tackling loneliness, and will she tell us whether the Government are in a position to commit to fully replacing that funding when it is lost?

It is welcome that the Minister has announced an extra £1.8 million funding for community projects to help to tackle loneliness, but that is a pretty small drop in the ocean compared with the projected £3.5 billion shortfall in funding for social care. That £1.8 million would reopen just four of the 1,000 children’s centres, or nine of the 428 day centres, that have closed under this Government. Unless the Chancellor reverses cuts in public health funding in the Budget, the flourishing of social prescribing and community projects that the Minister wants to see will never happen. Will she explain what steps she and her colleagues are taking, particularly with the Budget approaching, to ensure that adequate funding will be available for these services? Will the Government adopt Age UK’s proposal to apply a binding loneliness test to all future decisions to ensure that they do not increase loneliness or decrease our capacity to tackle it?

The Opposition welcome the Government’s decision to adopt a loneliness strategy. There is much in it that is good, and it is certainly a step in the right direction, but the fine words that it contains will not reduce loneliness to the extent that we all hope for unless the Government stop cutting the services and organisations that are helping to tackle loneliness in our communities.

Tracey Crouch: I thank my hon. Friend for that question. We recognise the importance of families in tackling loneliness, and it is true that the fragmentation of families and the way in which we all live and work may well have contributed to loneliness. Many young people leave their home communities, often for study or work, and that in turn can have an impact on families. We are an incredibly busy society, and we can quite often forget members of our family, so all that is at the heart of the strategy.

I am grateful to the hon. Member for Croydon North (Mr Reed) for welcoming the strategy. It has involved nine months of extremely hard work from nine different Departments to support the 9 million people who identify themselves as lonely. We know that this issue is enormously important to people. One in five people identify as lonely, and young people between the ages of 16 and 24 now identify themselves as being more lonely than older people. There are many groups in society that, through various life changes, suddenly find themselves suffering from loneliness. Jo herself said that loneliness does not discriminate, and trigger points can happen at any particular time—no one is immune to that sense of overwhelming loneliness.

I hope that the hon. Gentleman has the opportunity to read the whole strategy and to examine its 58 recommendations, including the policy test, which will answer many of his questions. We recognise that difficult decisions were taken during difficult times to try to regain an economic balance, but those decisions may have had an inadvertent impact on loneliness. Going forward, we want to ensure that we recognise loneliness, make policies responsibly—just as we do for other issues in society—and consider all that as part of the policy test.

Fiona Bruce (Congleton) (Con): I commend the Minister for her statement and her work on this issue and welcome a cross-departmental strategy on loneliness. Does she agree that one of the greatest antidotes to loneliness is stronger families? In the opinion of many of us, it is the greatest antidote and can help many linked problems, such as homelessness, addiction and mental health challenges. As the strategy is implemented, will my hon. Friend commit to ensuring that her Department and others actively consider how they can promote the strengthening of family life? As a start, will they also ensure that the family test is properly and comprehensively applied across Government?

Tracey Crouch: I thank my hon. Friend for that question. We recognise the importance of families in tackling loneliness, and it is true that the fragmentation of families and the way in which we all live and work may well have contributed to loneliness. Many young people leave their home communities, often for study or work, and that in turn can have an impact on families. We are an incredibly busy society, and we can quite often forget members of our family, so all that is at the heart of the strategy.

Chris Stephens (Glasgow South West) (SNP): I join the Minister and shadow Minister in thanking you, Mr Speaker, for a beautiful tribute to our colleague Jo Cox, and I welcome her family. As someone who came to this place as part of the 2015 intake, I assure Jo’s family members that she will be remembered quite simply as a bright and brilliant Member of Parliament.

I thank the Minister for her statement, and I am sure that she will agree that social isolation is often little understood and can have an enormous impact on people’s physical and mental health. In January this year, the Scottish Government published a consultation on their new national strategy—one of the first in the world to help tackle loneliness and isolation. However, in a similar vein to the questions from the shadow Minister, we know that poverty can be a key factor in social exclusion. The less money someone has, the less likely it is that they can afford to meet people. They might not have the money for a coffee with a friend or even be able to afford to take public transport to visit a friend. Will the Minister commit to look at the impact of poverty on social exclusion as part of the strategy? Will she also consider the impact of the Government’s social security policies and investigate any correlations between cuts in income and increases in social isolation?

Tracey Crouch: The Government have been working closely with the Administration in Scotland, and we have looked at Scotland’s work on this issue, too. We will continue to work with all our devolved partners to come up with a comprehensive strategy for the whole United Kingdom.

As I said in response to the hon. Member for Croydon North, we know there are trigger points. One of them is debt, about which I spoke very personally in an interview with The Sunday Times over the weekend. I completely recognise and understand how it is difficult for people with no money to go out and make connections with others, which is why this is a cross-Government strategy.

We are looking at all the different aspects, and nothing is exempt from the strategy to tackle loneliness. Supporting those in debt and on low incomes is definitely part of the strategy.

Neil O’Brien (Harborough) (Con): First, does the Minister agree that, although the challenge of loneliness is big, the public’s appetite to do something about it...
is great? It is not just the brilliant work of the Jo Cox commission. When I have done things to address loneliness in my constituency, I thought half a dozen people would come, but actually hundreds came. People really want to do something about this.

Secondly, does the Minister agree that involvement in fighting loneliness not only helps those who are being helped but helps those who get involved? People involved with the befriending scheme of Voluntary Action South Leicestershire, a charity in my constituency, have made lots of new friends—it has been great for those who have got involved, as well as for those who are being helped.

Thirdly, does the Minister agree that we need to change the culture if we really want to tackle this problem? Schemes such as the “chatty café” at Zeph’s café in my constituency are a brilliant tribute to Jo Cox’s work, because they encourage people to start a conversation with those who are lonely. That is a great thing.

Tracey Crouch: This is a great opportunity to celebrate the work being done across the country. In fact, I have just met members of VASL at the strategy’s parliamentary launch. The “chatty café” scheme is fantastic, and there are lots of similar initiatives. Having worked on loneliness, it is incredibly heartwarming that a number of organisations out there have just been getting on with it for a significant length of time. When we announced the strategy, I was contacted by thousands of organisations similar to those in my hon. Friend’s constituency.

I commend my hon. Friend’s work with the all-party group, and long may addressing this issue continue to be on the agenda of all politicians.

Rachel Reeves (Leeds West) (Lab): If Jo were still here today, she would have been a Member of Parliament for almost three and a half years. She was in this House for just one year, but in that short space of time she achieved more than most of us could hope to achieve in a lifetime.

Tackling loneliness is part of Jo’s legacy, and it is a tribute to her approach to politics and her approach to life, which is that we have more in common than that which divides us.

I am proud to have played a small part in taking forward Jo’s work on this very important issue, but I want to build on what other Members have said this afternoon. The good thing about loneliness is that it is something we can all do something about, one conversation at a time.

Will the Minister join me in encouraging all of us in this House, and all of us in all of our constituencies, to live our lives a little more like Jo Cox lived hers, by putting other people first and by always thinking about what we can do? Whether it is people in our friendship groups, our families or our communities, we should have one conversation at a time to try to reach out and help those who are struggling with loneliness. If we do that, we will all help to secure Jo’s legacy and help to build a world that is a little less lonely.

Tracey Crouch: I cannot pay enough tribute to the hon. Lady’s work in taking forward the work that Jo started. Like me, the hon. Lady was rather daunted when she started on the journey to tackle this incredibly complex issue. There is no single cause of loneliness, and there is no single solution. The more we can talk about it in this place and beyond, the better. We are on loneliness where we were on mental health 10 years ago, and where we can reduce stigma by going out to support our constituents, our friends and our families, we will be all the better for it.

Rachel Maclean (Redditch) (Con): It would be interested to hear more from the Minister about what she thinks the role of social media is. Social media can often have a negative influence, particularly on young people, but does she think it could have a positive role to play in tackling loneliness?

Tracey Crouch: I said that there is no single cause of loneliness and therefore there is no single solution, and the same logic applies in respect of social media. We know that 16 to 24-year-olds are more lonely than other groups in society, and that is quite often attributed to the fact that they are much more digitally connected. At the same time, social media can also provide solutions for those who do find themselves lonely. A huge number of apps have been developed to support various groups in society, including Mush, which helps young mums. Technology has also been developed to keep older people connected to their families. As much as social media can be described as a cause, it can also be the solution.

Paula Sherriff (Dewsbury) (Lab): I have great respect for the Minister, and never more so than today, and I thank her for the words in her statement. Austerity has undeniably led to a reduction in the number of facilities available in the community, but today I want to pay tribute to the incredible volunteer groups, community groups and friendship groups in my constituency and in the neighbouring constituency of Batley and Spen, because the work these volunteers do is absolutely phenomenal—they are simply plugging a gap, particularly at the moment. Will she therefore join me today in thanking all those groups, including More in Common, which was formed after the tragic death of Jo?

Tracey Crouch: Nothing would give me greater pleasure than to do so. We need to remember that difficult decisions have been taken over the past eight years to tackle the deficit, and that has forced many people to rethink how some of the services have been delivered. In some cases they are now being delivered better, because there has been an evolution in service delivery. That is thanks to many voluntary organisations and charities, which have helped to create a more imaginative response to delivering some of those services. I recognise that that is not the case across the board, and it would be churlish not to do so. We also have to recognise that there are lots of different reasons, not all of which are funding-related issues. But we are where we are, and we have now taken this forward to try to ensure that we have a strategy that futureproofs these services in order to help tackle loneliness for all age groups across our society.

Simon Hoare (North Dorset) (Con): I thank the Minister for an excellent statement, but may I press her on two things? First, I ask her to make a strong and robust case to the Treasury and our colleagues in the
Ministry of Housing, Communities and Local Government to set up some ring-fenced funding for local councils to bid into, in order to evolve and deliver bespoke loneliness strategies. We have done this in other areas of local government policy and this one particularly cries out for it. Secondly, may I urge her always to keep in mind the need to sculpt bespoke rural policies and take into account the geography of our rural constituencies? Although I appreciate the challenges that exist across the whole of our country, they are that much more difficult to deal with in that widely spread, low population, rural setting.

Tracey Crouch: The Secretary of State for Digital, Culture, Media and Sport is sitting next to me on the Front Bench, and I am sure he heard the calls for him to have another conversation with the Chancellor—I am sure he will do that with great interest and enthusiasm. The issue of rural loneliness is fascinating, because statistics show that there are slightly higher loneliness levels in urban communities than in rural communities. Whereas rural communities might face greater levels of isolation, the loneliness does not necessarily follow; these are two very different issues. That said, there are unique issues faced by rural communities, which is why the Department for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs has been one of the Departments involved and why it is working on tackling rural isolation and loneliness.

Wera Hobhouse (Bath) (LD): It is rather moving to be here in the Chamber this afternoon, and I cannot think of anything better to honour Jo’s memory than getting this right. Last Wednesday was World Mental Health Day. Tackling mental health issues can be incredibly difficult and very lonely to deal with. What efforts is the Minister making to ensure that the UK provides more access to opportunities for people to reach out and seek support?

Tracey Crouch: That is a good question. We are working closely with our colleagues in the Department of Health and Social Care on the link between loneliness and mental health. The two are not always linked and it is important that we do not badge loneliness as a mental health condition; it is certainly a public health condition. We are working with the DHSC on its development of the strategies on mental health and we will continue to do so.

Mr Simon Clarke (Middlesbrough South and East Cleveland) (Con): First, let me thank the Minister for what was a really excellent statement. Obviously, many of us were not Members of the House when Jo was a Member, but it is abundantly clear that she was held in the very highest regard—and rightly so—for what she did. It is incredibly impressive to see the unifying effect that she still has today; it feels very much as though she did. It is incredibly impressive to see the unifying effect that she still has today; it feels very much as though she is, in some ways, still part of today’s statement, and the message that this sends out is incredibly powerful.

Will the Minister join me in thanking the work of organisations such as Men’s Shed Redcar, which covers the East Cleveland part of my constituency? It is a space for men—sometimes we men are not very good at reaching out to each other and being communal—and a really good way of making sure that they have a space to come together, congregate and, in the words of the organisation, create.

Tracey Crouch: I love Men’s Sheds—a little bit too much to be honest. I could quite happily spend my time in a Men’s Shed learning how to craft bird boxes and various other things and having a good old chat about the football. There are many organisations out there. It is really important that we do recognise—again, repeating the words of Jo—that loneliness does not discriminate. It impacts enormously on men as well, and there are some fantastic organisations out there supporting them.

Stephen Morgan (Portsmouth South) (Lab): I very much welcome the Minister’s announcement, but can she confirm what assessment her Department has undertaken of the loss of 2,400 bus routes across the country, including in my constituency, and the impact of that on social isolation and loneliness?

Tracey Crouch: The Department for Transport is very heavily involved in this strategy. As the hon. Gentleman will have heard in my statement, one of the Transport Ministers will now have loneliness as part of their portfolio. It is important to recognise that rural bus services are incredibly important. They are a matter on which local authorities make decisions. I appreciate that, quite often, those decisions can be difficult, but if a rural bus service, a late evening service or an early morning service is axed, it can clearly have an impact on people’s ability to stay connected to their community.

Paul Masterton (East Renfrewshire) (Con): I thank the Minister for the very honest comments that she made in her interview at the weekend about the loneliness experienced by new parents—both mums and dads. That is something with which both my wife and I can empathise, as I am sure can parents right across East Renfrewshire. Given that loneliness does not discriminate, will she ensure that, when rolling out the strategy and creating measures to raise awareness and tackle loneliness, those initiatives are bespoke to people, age groups and locales, and this is not simply a one-size campaign?

Tracey Crouch: I completely agree with my hon. Friend. It is new parents who can feel loneliness, not just new mums. In the strategy, we highlight a case study involving Mush, an app that supports new mums, but we use an infographic of a dad pushing a pushchair because we do recognise that becoming a new parent can be as lonely for a new father as it is for a new mum. Community groups and services are quite often available for mothers and babies, but there is not necessarily the same thing out there for dads and babies. We need to make sure that we look at all people within society, and that is what this strategy and vision do.

Dr David Drew (Stroud) (Lab/Co-op): Some of the early work on social prescribing was undertaken in Dursley in the Stroud constituency by Dr Simon Opher and his partners. We also did some work on village agents that was initiated by the Department for Work and Pensions, which involved going out into the villages and making sure that older people were, first, looked after, but, secondly, able to claim the benefits to which they were entitled. Will the Minister have a word with the DWP and give some greater impetus to that particularly good scheme?
Tracey Crouch: We are working very closely with the DWP on some of these initiatives. We do actually see it as one of our frontline providers of solutions on tackling loneliness across the board. I would be very interested to hear more about the scheme that the hon. Gentleman mentions, and, if he would like to write to me, I will look further into it.

Alison Thewliss (Glasgow Central) (SNP): There are many groups within the Glasgow Central constituency that I could highlight for tackling loneliness. Brilliant groups are working very hard, but I would particularly like to mention the Citizens Theatre's community collective, which received Big Lottery funding this year to run drama classes to tackle social isolation. I understand that those classes will happen every Friday for the next four years, which is absolutely brilliant. I mention that because the Minister is meeting Citizens Theatre at an event tomorrow afternoon.

That is very much on the positive side of things and great community work is ongoing, but the loneliest people I see in my surgeries are those with immigration status issues. I met an incredibly sad young man at my surgery who was awaiting his wife coming here from very dangerous circumstances. Will the Minister look into what can be done to speed up these processes? It is incredibly debilitating and a cause of loneliness for many people I see at my surgeries when their spouse or family member is so far away and they are not able to reach them.

Tracey Crouch: A colleague from the Home Office is part of the group. Refugees and others within the immigration system were actually considered as part of the strategy, so I encourage the hon. Lady to look at the report in detail to see how we are tackling that particular issue. Like her, I commend all the organisations out there that are getting together in imaginative and creative ways to reach parts of the community through a variety of initiatives, including drama classes.

Susan Elan Jones (Clwyd South) (Lab): The Minister will be more than aware that the issue of place is raised in the Government's civil society strategy, as is the infrastructure of the voluntary sector, which varies enormously between places. Will the Government look seriously at the capacity building of organisations that may be required to support people in loneliness? Will the Minister also look at the excellent example of the South Denbighshire Community Partnership and its fantastic work supporting people in a rural community?

Tracey Crouch: We published the civil society strategy before the loneliness strategy very much on purpose in order to create a framework to support important members of civil society that will then help us with many of the initiatives to tackle loneliness. In that strategy, we purposely looked at place, frameworks and everything else to which the hon. Lady alludes. With regard to the project in her constituency, I know that Wales is looking at developing its own strategy, and we are working closely with the Administration to support them in that.

Gill Furniss (Sheffield, Brightside and Hillsborough) (Lab): As chair of the all-party group on libraries, I was proud to launch Libraries Week alongside the Chartered Institute of Library and Information Professionals last week in the very splendid state rooms in Speaker's House. This year's theme was libraries and wellbeing, highlighting the important ways in which libraries contribute to combating loneliness and social isolation. Does the Minister agree that libraries are a crucial community resource that are already tackling this important issue, and that we must properly invest in them for a better future for all? If there is any additional funding, will she see whether it could be given to libraries to support this really important initiative?

Tracey Crouch: On the hon. Lady's last point, the Secretary of State is sitting on the Treasury Bench, so I am sure that that will be added to his list of things to ask the Chancellor.

I completely agree that libraries play an important role. Over the last few years, they have evolved into bigger and greater community hubs, and have become more diverse in what they offer. My local authorities—I have two in my constituency—have closed none of their libraries. In fact, they have looked at how they can better use the space. For example, one of the libraries that I go to also has our local dementia café. Libraries are important, and they need to look at everything they can do to create connections for people in their communities.

Mr Speaker: I thank the Minister, the shadow Minister and the—

Chris Elmore (Ogmore) (Lab) rose—

Mr Speaker: Oh, I do beg the hon. Gentleman's pardon. I am very sorry; I certainly do not want him to be lonely.

Chris Elmore: I know I am shrinking, Mr Speaker, but not quite at that rate.

I thank the Minister most sincerely for her statement. I had only served in this House for six weeks with Jo when she was taken from us, but we had been friends for the preceding three years, when I was a candidate up until I lost in 2015. When I was selected for my constituency, she sent me a text saying, “Better late than never, mate.” In the six weeks as a new Member in which I served with her, there was either a text, a WhatsApp message or a written note asking whether I was okay, so Jo really did practise what she preached.

The Welsh Government are responsible for the loneliness strategy in Wales. The Minister will be aware that the Well-being of Future Generations (Wales) Act 2015 requires public bodies to look at issues around loneliness as part of wider public service delivery. Given the extra money that she has announced today, will there be any Barnett consequentials in the form of additional funding for the devolved Administrations?

Finally, if I may beg your indulgence, Mr Speaker, will the Minister join me in paying tribute to the connecting the elderly group in Llanharan that supports pensioners around the Pencoed, Llanharan, Bryncae and Llanharry communities by providing afternoon teas free of charge for up to 20 residents every single month to try to improve their community spirit and get them out of the house?

Tracey Crouch: I like a challenge, Mr Speaker, but there is no way I am repeating that!
Obviously, I support the work of the hon. Gentleman’s constituency organisation. With reference to the Barnett formula, there is nothing in this strategy relating to that, but I am sure that colleagues from other Departments will have heard his question.

Mr Speaker: I thank the Minister, the shadow Minister, the spokesperson for the Scottish National party and all other contributors to the exchanges on this statement. What colleagues have said and, at least as importantly, the way in which they have said it, has been true, without exception, to the spirit of the late and great Jo. As one colleague observed, one felt that Jo was in a sense here and part of this statement, because it springs from her. Everybody can see the permanent testament both to the outrage, and to the respect and affection, that we feel, and will always feel, for Jo, for her family, and for everyone—goodness knows, it was a very large number of people—who admired and loved her. The challenge now is to give effect to the strategy in a way that does us all credit and would get her nod of approval.

Hon. Members: Hear, hear.

Points of Order

6.46 pm

Jonathan Ashworth: On a point of order, Mr Speaker. Last Tuesday, in the urgent question on clinical waste, the Minister of State explicitly denied that the scandal was a result of a lack of incinerator capacity. When I asked him whether there was enough incinerator capacity, he said:

“The answer to that is, yes there is.”—[Official Report, 9 October 2018; Vol. 647, c. 35.]

You will have seen subsequently, Mr Speaker, in your copy of the Health Service Journal, that according to the minutes of a meeting of NHS Improvement officials held in August, they

“acknowledged there appeared to be a national market capacity issue”.

It turns out that the Environment Agency had said something similar back in August. This suggests that in fact the Government were aware of this and do accept that there is a clinical waste incinerator shortage. Has the Minister given you notice that he will come to make a statement to clear up this apparent contradiction and correct the record?

Mr Speaker: I am very grateful to the hon. Gentleman for that point of order. Of course I remember the exchanges to which he has referred. I have not, to date, been advised of any intention by anyone to come to the House to make a statement, but of course, as the hon. Gentleman knows well, every Member in this place, including every Minister, is responsible for what he or she says in the Chamber. In the event that anybody feels that there is a need for a correction, that Member must take the lead in bringing about that correction in the Official Report. I think that we had better leave it there for now, but meanwhile the hon. Gentleman has made his point forcefully.

Yvette Cooper (Normanton, Pontefract and Castleford) (Lab) rose—

Mr Speaker: And I have a feeling that it is about to be buttressed and reinforced by a Member with a notable constituency interest.

Yvette Cooper: Further to that point of order, Mr Speaker. The evidence that we have seen is that there is a growing gap between what the Minister told the House and the reality that we are seeing on the ground, including rumours that Mitie has neither the workforce, the sites nor the lorries to deal with the majority of this waste. We now have shipping containers in place at Pontefract Hospital, with no clarity about what will be put in them. The workforce at the Healthcare Environmental Services site in Normanton are being told nothing at all about whether they will be TUPE-ed, whether they have to carry on with existing work, or what will happen to their jobs. I am sure you will agree that that is deeply unfair on the workforce. Given that the Minister promised to make things better, and it appears that they may be being made worse, what other advice can you give us on how to get the Minister to provide more clarity to the House about what is happening?

Mr Speaker: I am grateful to the right hon. Lady. The Minister will have heard what has been said, or if the
Minister has not yet heard what has been said, the information about these exchanges will be transmitted, I think, extremely quickly.

The right hon. Member for Normanton, Pontefract and Castleford (Yvette Cooper) is a very experienced Member of the House. I will not say she is a veteran, for that would be wrong, but she is a very experienced Member—we came into the House together—and she will know that there are ways to ensure that a matter can be addressed as a matter of urgency in the Chamber. That cannot now happen today, but I rather imagine that the shadow Secretary of State, the hon. Member for Leicester South (Jonathan Ashworth), and the right hon. Lady will be expecting an update tomorrow. In the expectation but also potentially in lieu of such an update, they know what mechanism is available to them.

Rachel Maclean (Redditch) (Con): On a point of order, Mr Speaker. I wish to place on record that I omitted to declare an interest when I questioned my right hon. Friend the Secretary of State for Digital, Culture, Media and Sport on the 5G West Midlands bid. I asked what the benefits were for my constituency, but I failed to declare that my husband is the CEO of the company. While he is working as a volunteer, he receives no remuneration, but it has been brought to my attention that I should have mentioned that connection. I wish to correct the record, with your permission.

Mr Speaker: I very much appreciate what the hon. Lady has said. She has corrected the record extremely quickly, and I am confident that that will be accepted by the House in the spirit in which she has offered the correction. I thank her. I will leave it there for now, but I look forward to seeing colleagues erelong.

OFFENSIVE WEAPONS BILL

Bill to be considered tomorrow.

Valerie Vaz (Walsall South) (Lab): On a point of order, Madam Deputy Speaker. I am grateful for you taking this point of order. I want to know why the House was not informed at the earliest opportunity that the Offensive Weapons Bill, a very important Bill, was not going to be moved. We have just found out that it has been rescheduled for tomorrow. I wonder why we and the business managers were not informed in a timely manner.

David Hanson (Delyn) (Lab): Further to that point of order, Madam Deputy Speaker. I am interested in why the Leader of the House has not come to make a business statement about this matter, given that she announced this business on Thursday last week and that many outside organisations have expected to see important debates on airguns, gun control and, crucially, as covered by my amendments, assaults on and threatening behaviour towards retail staff in the exercise of their duties. I would like to know whether “tomorrow” means tomorrow in this case or some unspecified date to be announced in the future. Given that material has been printed and the House still has three and a quarter hours in which this debate could take place, can we have an explanation?

Madam Deputy Speaker (Dame Rosie Winterton): First, it might be helpful if I explain that while the Government have put the Bill down for tomorrow, that does not mean it will be taken tomorrow. It is a matter for the Government when they bring the Bill back. It is the usual practice for Government Bills to be set down in the remaining Orders for the next sitting day, but then for the Leader of the House to announce in the business statement when they are actually expected to be taken. I am sure that Ministers on the Treasury Bench have heard the concerns raised by Members. The Leader of the House will be responding to business questions on Thursday in the usual way, which will provide an opportunity for Members to ask what the Government’s intention is, if that is not made clear in the Leader of the House’s opening statement.

Valerie Vaz: Further to that point of order, Madam Deputy Speaker. This is such an important Bill: it is about protecting people and, in the case of some of the amendments in the name of my right hon. Friend the Member for Delyn (David Hanson), about protecting shop workers. Could the Leader of the House come to the House at her earliest convenience—when she is not buying pizzas for everyone—and inform us when this matter will be taken in the Chamber?

Madam Deputy Speaker: As I have said, there will be an opportunity on Thursday to question the Leader of the House. I have not received any indication that she will be coming to the House earlier than that, but there will be such an opportunity on Thursday. As I have said, those on the Treasury Bench have heard the concerns of Members.

I wish to inform the House that nominations for the election of a Chair of the Committee on Standards closed at 5 pm today. As a single nomination was received, I can now announce that no ballot is necessary and that Kate Green is elected unopposed. I congratulate her on her assumption of that role.
Ipswich-London Rail Fares

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

6.56 pm

Sandy Martin (Ipswich) (Lab): Although I am here to talk about rail fares, I should start by making it clear that I believe Ipswich is conveniently connected to London and that rail is by far the most effective and sustainable way to travel between the two cities under all normal circumstances. Like some other Suffolk MPs, I almost always use the train to get here, and on the two occasions in the past 16 months when I have had to drive to Westminster, I have had ample reminder of what a bad idea it is to drive in central London if one can avoid it.

Travelling from Ipswich station is a joy. It is easy to get to by bus, taxi or bicycle or on foot, the staff are friendly and helpful, and the facilities are excellent. It is not just me saying that: Ipswich won the Network Rail award for the best large station for 2018. I am looking forward to having all new trains on the Great Eastern main line, starting from April next year, and I would be able to look forward to shorter journey times as well if only the Government were willing to put the money into the fairly modest track improvements that our region has been calling for.

Ipswich is a town undergoing a renaissance, and that renaissance is partly due to our proximity to London. When IT, software, media and arts-related companies are considering relocating to Ipswich—or, indeed, starting up in Ipswich, which is regarded in at least one business survey as the best start-up location for small businesses in the UK—I want them to know that they can easily visit their families or friends in London and can easily invite clients up from London. In short, they are not cutting themselves off from our capital city in any way.

The cost of fares is not going to be the No. 1 criterion for any business relocating, nor should it be. For those travelling daily between London and Ipswich, the annual season ticket, at £6,548, while eye-wateringly expensive by the standards of most European countries, is not completely out of step with other destinations in England. It is 1p per mile more expensive than Cambridge, but 1.3p per mile less expensive than Oxford. I apologise now for any inaccuracy in my figures, but it appears to be as difficult to pin down actual costs per mile as it is for passengers to find out how much their tickets would cost before they travel.

Although annual season tickets are regulated, anytime walk-on fares have been allowed to rise year after year, and in effect penalise passengers for travelling without advance planning. This really matters because, in the modern work pattern—we are talking about attracting modern, creative businesses outside London—we are talking about attracting modern, creative and information-based industries—most of the travelling will not be on a nine-to-five work day basis. When businesses invite clients to visit, they may not know when they are likely to come until the day concerned. When staff are working on projects, they may decide at a moment’s notice that they need to visit a colleague. While the season ticket cost for travelling from Ipswich to London is 73.9p per mile, the walk-on peak time fare is 74.4p per mile. I have found a town in the UK where the anytime walk-on fare is even more expensive, and I will be passing my findings to the Members for Swindon. However, the main point I want to get across is, first, that the exorbitant cost of walk-on fares has the potential to hold back the growth of modern, flexible, creative businesses outside London.

James Cartidge (South Suffolk) (Con): I congratulate my neighbour on securing the debate, which will be welcomed by my constituents who commute from Ipswich. When we talk about the cost of commuting, it is not just about the cost of the train fare. Most of my constituents drive to stations such as Ipswich, Manningtree and so on. Does the hon. Gentleman share my concern that, on our line, the cost of parking has risen substantially above inflation? The cost is not regulated, and many of my constituents are as concerned about it as they are about the cost of the rail fare.

Sandy Martin: I understand the concerns that the hon. Gentleman’s constituents have. I have to say that, if constituents can find a way of getting to the station that does not involve parking, that is clearly preferable. I would certainly not encourage people to drive to Ipswich station and park during the week, and there are bus services to Ipswich station. If his constituents wish to park at a station, Manningtree is probably a more sensible station to drive to than Ipswich.

The anomalies in fares between one town and another confuse travellers, including business travellers and people travelling to visit families in another town, and put many people off using the trains before they have even looked at the prices. It may take only one return trip costing over £100 to dissuade someone from using the trains ever again. It is all very well for rail operators and the Government to point to advance tickets, which can give excellent value for money—I myself have made extensive use of advance tickets, travelling, for instance, to Edinburgh and back for less than it would cost me to travel to London on a peak-time ticket—but if the cost of rail travel bears no relation to the distance, or apparently anything else, the confusion experienced by first-time rail passengers who are stung with maximum fares will not encourage them to travel by train again.

Dr David Drew (Stroud) (Lab/Co-op): My hon. Friend is making an excellent case about the problems between Ipswich and London. Would he accept that that is part of a bigger problem? Traditionally the Stroud valleys line, which I represent part of, has always been more expensive than the Cotswold line. Does he think that this issue is worthy of a much bigger investigation, to look at the disparities between different parts of the country and at the way people have to pay bigger fares to travel on some lines?

Sandy Martin: My hon. Friend has absolutely encapsulated the point of my argument, which is that the way fares are allocated to different stations and towns across the country is entirely illogical. There should be some logic behind the fares that are charged; otherwise, passengers become confused and, in many cases, stop travelling by rail.

Vicky Ford (Chelmsford) (Con): I congratulate the hon. Gentleman on securing this debate. To get from Ipswich to London, passengers of course have to pass through Chelmsford, which is the busiest two-platform train station anywhere on the network. By the time the
train from Ipswich to Chelmsford, it is often very crowded, especially at peak times, so while he may be arguing for lower walk-on fares at peak times, I would actually discourage lower walk-on fares at peak times, and encourage people to pay more in advance.

However, what I really want to raise with the hon. Gentleman is the fact that the Government have introduced Delay Repay, and some of my constituents have had up to £400 back under the 30-minute Delay Repay, which is clearly great. Does he welcome the Secretary of State’s comments last week that he expects the 15-minute Delay Repay to be introduced on our shared line next year, which would be great for customers?

Sandy Martin: I thank the hon. Lady for her comments. I do share her joy at additional funding for Delay Repay. While I love Chelmsford, I am very happy not to stop there, whenever possible. If there were an additional two lines between Colchester and London, we could sail through Chelmsford without stopping. She would not then have to put up with passengers from Ipswich on the trains she wants to get on, but that is probably something for a fairly dim and distant future.

Vicky Ford: Many of the hon. Gentleman’s constituents actually work in my constituency.

Sandy Martin: Indeed they do. However, if they are travelling to Chelmsford and getting off at Chelmsford, clearly they are not in the way of Chelmsford passengers who want to travel to London.

The confusion in the fares charged is particularly stark in Ipswich. The next station on the line to London has fares that are so much lower than ours it is usually cheaper to buy a ticket from Ipswich to Manningtree, followed by another ticket from Manningtree to London, than it is to simply buy a ticket to London. This situation has persisted for well over 20 years. Some canny passengers deliberately buy tickets from Ipswich to Manningtree and from Manningtree to London to save significant sums on their fares. It feels wrong. Many passengers will not do it. Many do not realise that they could save money by doing it. It makes the entire fares structure look ridiculous, which it is.

Jim Shannon (Strangford) (DUP): On the news this morning, it was stated that the number of those travelling by bus had fallen dramatically. There are a lot of reasons for that, relating to investment, costs and incentives. Does the hon. Gentleman feel that, if the Government were to consider reinvestment and making tickets more cost-effective, in addition to incentives, which some parts of the United Kingdom are introducing, that would be the way forward to secure this line?

Sandy Martin: I agree. The fact is that, if Governments invest in public transport as a public good, the number of people using that public transport tends to increase. This country has taken the view that passengers should be charged as close to the actual cost as possible. I am not sure that that is necessarily sensible.

I understand that the reasons for the anomaly between Ipswich and Manningtree, and for many other anomalous differences in fares between towns at a similar distance to London, is partly due to the Network Railcard area. The Network Railcard is a complete mystery to me. Ipswich is outside the area. Peterborough is outside the area. Swindon, the most expensive place in the country to travel from by train, is outside the area. But Kings Lynn is in the area. And so is Weymouth. And so is Worcester. And so is Exeter. I realise that if there is going to be a Network Railcard there needs to be a Network Railcard area, and that the line has to be drawn somewhere. I just wish it were not drawn in a way that so gratuitously disadvantages Ipswich. Ipswich is the final stop for stopping trains on the Great Eastern main line commuter service. If a line has to be drawn, it is nonsensical to draw it just before the destination of the commuter trains it has been created to facilitate.

On 11 October, the Secretary of State launched a root and branch review of the rail industry. In September, 20,000 people responded to a consultation on fares. Many of the improvements passengers want, such as making tickets jargon-free and improving the availability of smart ticketing, are already priorities for the Government and for the train operators. But I want to take this opportunity to make a plea to the Government to adhere to one or two basic principles in the improvements that they make to the fares structure. First, no single journey should ever be more expensive than the sum of its parts. Secondly, for any journey where the anytime walk-on fare is clearly above the national average cost per mile, those fares should be frozen until they are in line with the national average. Thirdly, the Network Railcard area should be reviewed, with some objectivity involved in deciding where the boundary should be and with a fares structure that does not suddenly penalise those stations that are just outside the area.

The root and branch review will take time. Many of its recommendations may be unpalatable to the Government. Some of them may be unpalatable to me. I, like the rest of my party, would like to see train operator franchises taken back into public ownership as and when the franchises expire or are surrendered. I would like to see rail travel being treated as an investment in our country’s productive capacity and a Government priority to meet our climate change commitments. I would prefer not to have certain regions, such as East Anglia, paying what is in effect a tax on train travel to the Government, although I am not necessarily expecting those recommendations to be in the panel’s report. I would prefer that Ipswich’s rail passengers should not have to wait for that report before they see any change in their fares.

In addition to the principles that I believe the Government should seek to enshrine in any sensible fares structure, and pending any root and branch reform of fares, I call on the Minister—with the co-operation of any agency that he believes needs to be seen to be making this decision—to include Ipswich, possibly the closest point to London that is not in the Network Railcard area, forthwith, so that this historical anomaly can be ended immediately.

7.10 pm

The Minister of State, Department for Transport (Joseph Johnson): I congratulate the hon. Member for Ipswich (Sandy Martin) on securing this debate. I am delighted that he is a fan of the railways and that he takes such pride in his local station in Ipswich.
I recognise the issues that the hon. Gentleman raised in relation to, in particular, the fares between Ipswich and London. As he recognised, these are, to some extent, the result of historical anomalies. As someone who follows the railways closely, he will know that following privatisation in the early 90s, the operation of the Great Eastern main line was shared between two operating companies until 2004. First Great Eastern operated stopping services from Liverpool Street to Ipswich and Anglia Railways operated the intercity services from Liverpool Street to Norwich. This led to a divergence of fares, increasing the pence-per-mile cost of Ipswich to London relative to, as he pointed out, Manningtree to London.

Manningtree was the furthest extent of the Network Railcard area, and Ipswich was the first station where fares were set by the intercity operator. They were set to reflect the different standard of services and offering on the intercity services, including for example, faster, air-conditioned trains. I appreciate that the differences in the fares today can seem unfair to passengers, but it is always possible for advance fares to be bought for travel between Ipswich and London for as little as £10.

As a Government, we have committed to reviewing rail ticketing to remove pricing complexity and perversity, and we are also awaiting the findings of the Rail Delivery Group’s “Easier Fares” consultation. That consultation concluded in September after running for three months. It aimed to look at fare structures and ticketing to ease passenger confusion, with a broad scope. The Rail Delivery Group received approximately 20,000 responses, which it is in the process of analysing, and I look forward to seeing its findings. As the hon. Gentleman mentioned, the recently announced rail review will also consider how to support a railway that is able to offer good value fares for passengers. In his thoughtful speech, he made a number of proposals for fares reform, which I will ensure reach the team that is undertaking the rail review.

James Cartlidge: On the point about reforming how fares are charged, I held an Adjournment debate on part-time season tickets, because there is a concern about that for many of us. We have many constituents who travel perhaps three or four days a week but have to pay a full season-ticket price. People constantly email me about the unfairness of that, and I wonder whether it will feature in the consultation that the Minister referred to.

Joseph Johnson: I thank my hon. Friend for that intervention. Introducing more flexible ticketing is a priority. We want to see franchises—not just in East Anglia and on the Greater Anglia part of the network, but across the country—looking at how creative they can be to ensure that people who work part-time have a means of securing tickets that are good value for money.

Dr Drew: Will the Minister include ticket machines in his review? One of the biggest rip-offs is when people cannot get the cheapest tickets. I am not talking about pre-buying; I am talking about how the machines always offer the most expensive fare.

Joseph Johnson: Absolutely. Ticket machines should be programmed to offer the best-value fare, and to the extent that they are not, it is worth further consideration by the team undertaking the rail review.

Turning to the cost of fares, the Government and the train operators have made long-term and far-reaching investments in the railways to cope with the considerable increase in use in the years since privatisation. Fares revenue is crucial to funding day-to-day railway operations, and the massive upgrade programme we are delivering now will benefit passengers. We know that a rise in rail fares can affect the family budgets of hard-working people, including commuters in the constituency of the hon. Member for Ipswich and in London, which is why, for the sixth year running, we will be capping regulated fares in line with inflation.

Dr Dan Poulter (Central Suffolk and North Ipswich) (Con): I thank my hon. Friend for his welcome news on capping rail fares, but does he not also agree that it is difficult for customers to disaggregate the cost of the fare—those in Ipswich are very high per mile by national standards—from reliability and speed of service? Despite the cost of tickets from Ipswich, reliability and speed of service have not improved over the years. Reliability, speed of service and track capacity desperately need to improve and be better linked to fare prices.

Joseph Johnson: Of course I agree that performance, whether measured by reliability or punctuality, is exceptionally important to passengers and their perception of value for money. Performance on Greater Anglia has been reasonably good over recent weeks. From memory—I am seeking a prompt—I think its public performance measure is around 89%, so just a couple of percentage points off its target for the relevant period, but there is always room for improvement and we carefully monitor how it is doing against its targets.

Alex Chalk (Cheltenham) (Con): I take an interest in this because Cheltenham, perhaps like Ipswich, is affected by pricing perversity, meaning it is much more expensive per mile to travel from Cheltenham—[Interruption.—]—and indeed from Stroud, which, I am told, is more expensive per mile than some other parts of the country. I am delighted about the review, therefore, but will it address this geographical perversity, which disadvantages my constituents?

Joseph Johnson: No one could defend the current fares system, and I will certainly not attempt to do so; it needs thorough reform, and the rail review’s work will be an important contribution to that process.

Vicky Ford: May I encourage the Minister to look again at the punctuality figures, because it does not feel to my constituents that the trains are arriving on time nine days out of 10?

Joseph Johnson: I cannot speak to the experience of my hon. Friend’s constituents in particular, but I can confirm that Greater Anglia’s overall performance is currently around 89.1%, on the public performance measure, which assesses whether a train arrives within five minutes of its scheduled arrival time. That is against its target, under the franchise for this period, of 91.3%, so it is only marginally off what we have specified for that period of the year.

For the sixth year running, we are capping fees in line with inflation. It is important that we continue to receive this fare income, albeit capped, because it makes...
such a vital contribution to the investment that we are piling back into the rail system: 98p in every pound goes straight back in as investment. The most significant of those costs are the investments in the network itself and in staff costs, which is why it is so important that we get fares linked ultimately to the more commonly used CPI measure of inflation. For that to be sustainable, we need income and costs in the industry to change in parallel. Linking fares to the CPI without linking other costs in the industry to it would cause higher and higher costs to be borne by the taxpayer rather than by rail users. The Secretary of State wants to work with the rail industry, the Office of Rail and Road and the unions to ensure that wage costs for all employees are based on the CPI and not the RPI in future pay deals.

As the hon. Member for Ipswich noted, we are ensuring that when things do go wrong, passengers are compensated fairly. As was noted a few moments ago by my hon. Friend the Member for Chelmsford (Vicky Ford), we are in the process of moving Greater Anglia from Delay Repay 30 to Delay Repay 15, and we hope that the hon. Gentleman will be able to welcome that on behalf of his constituents. In his statement to the House on Thursday, the Secretary of State said that he wanted Delay Repay 15 to be introduced next year.

Stations are also receiving significant investment. Services on the Great Eastern main line between Norwich and London will be improved considerably. As I hope the hon. Gentleman recognises, access for disabled people at Ipswich station has been improved and smart ticketing has been introduced, all within the period of capping fare rises at inflation only. As a result—as the hon. Gentleman said—Ipswich station recently won the “large station of the year” award at the 2018 national rail awards event. That is all part of a £60 million programme of investment by Greater Anglia in stations on its network until 2025.

A number of members mentioned the new trains that will be introduced during the franchise period. That is an exciting and promising development for passengers in East Anglia. There will be 169 new trains—most of them electric, but some bimodal—to replace old British Rail-era rolling stock: much cleaner-running, faster, more spacious and more efficient modern trains for Members’ constituents.

Will Quince (Colchester) (Con): My constituents, who also travel on the Great Eastern main line, have waited for, in some cases, 40 years for the brand-new fleet of trains that will be introduced next year. The Minister mentioned changes in fares and infrastructure changes. Can he confirm that none of those changes would threaten the introduction of the new trains?

Joseph Johnson: Indeed they will not. Our priority is to ensure that the new trains are in service by the end of 2020. Once they have been introduced, passengers in Colchester will experience improved journey times, much greater reliability, and much more comfortable journeys.

I thank the hon. Member for Ipswich, and all colleagues in the Chamber who represent East Anglia—and parts of Gloucestershire, and areas further afield—for their contributions. We will continue to look at ways of being able both to improve services and to keep the cost to the passenger to a minimum. Greater Anglia is a train operator that will be in place at least until 2025, and it has shown a willingness to work with the Government and invest in the railways. I hope that, when we reach the end of the term of the East Anglia franchise, we will all be proud of the successes that the Government’s partnership with Greater Anglia has achieved.

Question put and agreed to.

7.23 pm

House adjourned.
House of Commons

Tuesday 16 October 2018

The House met at half-past Eleven o’clock

PRAYERS

[Mr Speaker in the Chair]

Oral Answers to Questions

BUSINESS, ENERGY AND INDUSTRIAL STRATEGY

The Secretary of State was asked—

Leaving the EU: Business Growth in Scotland

1. Peter Grant (Glenrothes) (SNP): What assessment he has made of the effect on business growth in Scotland of the UK leaving the EU internal market. [907070]

17. Patrick Grady (Glasgow North) (SNP): What assessment he has made of the effect on business growth in Scotland of the UK leaving the EU internal market. [907087]

23. Gavin Newlands (Paisley and Renfrewshire North) (SNP): What assessment he has made of the effect on business growth in Scotland of the UK leaving the EU internal market. [907094]

The Secretary of State for Business, Energy and Industrial Strategy (Greg Clark): Reaching a good agreement with the European Union will have a positive effect on business growth in Scotland and in every other part of the United Kingdom. In Green GB Week, it is important to highlight the huge clean growth opportunities in Scotland in a sector that supports tens of thousands of jobs and brings £11 billion into Scotland’s economy.

Peter Grant: Yesterday, AstraZeneca joined a long line of major UK employers that have put investment plans on hold because of Brexit uncertainty. The Governor of the Bank of England has indicated that, even before we leave, Brexit has already cost £900 per UK household. Does the Secretary of State agree with the Governor’s estimate? If he does not, what is his estimate of what Brexit has cost us to date?

Greg Clark: The hon. Gentleman’s point underlines why it is important that we secure a positive deal, and the implication of that analysis is that if we do secure that deal, as I hope and expect that we will, there will be a substantial upside for the economy. The hon. Gentleman is interested in the negotiations because they provide us with access to European markets, but it is a matter of record that the Scottish National party wants to take Scotland out of the internal market of the United Kingdom by dint of leaving the rest of the UK, with which Scotland does four times as much trade as it does with the rest of the EU, so I would call for a bit of consistency from the hon. Gentleman.

Patrick Grady: This is just nonsense. Does the Secretary of State not accept that, by definition, the best possible relationship with the European Union has to be membership and therefore that leaving the single market and ending the freedom of movement of goods, services and people will inevitably be bad for business? Can he offer any reassurances at all to the 134,000 Scottish workers whose jobs the Fraser of Allander Institute estimates are reliant on trade with the EU?

Greg Clark: The proposals have been warmly welcomed by businesses across the country, including in Scotland, because they would allow us to continue what are successful trading arrangements without frictions.

Gavin Newlands: In its Brexit risk assessment, Airbus said that if the UK left the EU without a deal, that “would lead to severe disruption and interruption of UK production” and “would force Airbus to reconsider its investments in the UK, and its long-term footprint in the country”. What steps is the Secretary of State, along with the wholly united Cabinet, taking to ensure that more firms do not depart Brexit Britain?

Greg Clark: We need to make sure that we have a negotiated deal along the lines of the proposals made in the White Paper that have been welcomed by the manufacturing industry in all parts of the UK.

22. Stephen Kerr (Stirling) (Con): One of the effects of leaving the European Union is that Scottish businesses will not have access to patient capital from the European Investment Bank, so will my right hon. Friend take the time to review the industry panel’s response to the patient capital review, which highlights the need for a patient capital investment vehicle? With only a few changes, the British Business Bank could become such a vehicle.

Greg Clark: My hon. Friend is right. Part of the industrial strategy is about making more patient capital available in Scotland and all across the UK for growing businesses, of which he has many in his constituency.

James Heappey (Wells) (Con): Does the Secretary of State agree that our membership of the internal energy market is not necessarily conditional on our membership of the wider single market? Does he agree that we would be better off were we to remain within the internal energy market, with all the energy security advantages that that brings?

Greg Clark: My hon. Friend anticipates some negotiations that will need to take place on our future economic partnership. Suffice it to say, however, that we have a mutual interest in the interconnection between the UK and the continent, and it is strongly in the interests of consumers in this country and on the continent that the ability to trade over those interconnectors should continue.
Andrew Bowie (West Aberdeenshire and Kincardine) (Con): Has my right hon. Friend made any assessment of the impact on business growth in Scotland if it left the UK’s internal market?

Greg Clark: It would be disastrous. The value of exports from Scotland to the rest of the UK is £45.8 billion, compared with around £12.5 billion to the rest of the EU, so anyone who, like me, is interested in being able to trade without frictions should apply their own analysis to their own policy of pulling out of the UK.

Drew Hendry (Inverness, Nairn, Badenoch and Strathspey) (SNP): Scotland’s financial sector has described the prospect of a no deal Brexit as “horrific”. Does the Secretary of State agree that to protect businesses and to stay in the single market and the customs union the Secretary of State for Scotland Ruth Davidson are a price well worth paying?

Greg Clark: I hope that the hon. Gentleman supports the Government’s determination to ensure that the integrity of the whole United Kingdom is guaranteed by the negotiation. He suggests that the consequences of no deal would be negative; of course they would. That is why we are doing everything we can, with increasing confidence, to secure a positive deal with the rest of the European Union. I hope he will support that.

Electrical Product Recall

2. Carolyn Harris (Swansea East) (Lab): What recent assessment he has made of the effectiveness of the electrical product recall regime. [907071]

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Business, Energy and Industrial Strategy (Kelly Tolhurst): In March, we published the first Government-backed code of practice on recalls, and we have trained almost 300 trading standards professionals on its use. The Office for Product Safety and Standards is working with UK manufacturers and importers to ensure that their recall plans and processes are adequate.

Carolyn Harris: Electrical Safety First tells me that the successful product recall rate for electrical goods is abysmally low, so why are the Government not doing more with platforms such as Amazon and eBay, which hold considerable consumer information, to find a solution to this problem?

Kelly Tolhurst: I thank the hon. Lady for her question, and I understand her particular interest in this area. She is the chair of the all-party parliamentary group on home electrical safety, which I look forward to meeting at the end of the month. With particular regard to online traders, we need to ensure consumer confidence. Amazon and eBay already have primary authority partnerships with trading standards. They are advised by trading standards on the regulations and work with them to make sure that goods are removed as quickly as possible.

Andrew Bridgen (North West Leicestershire) (Con): Those who do not wish us to leave the European Union claim that standards will fall, but will the Minister confirm that enhancing the UK’s product safety regime is in the industrial strategy, to give consumers in the UK and around the world ultimate confidence in the quality and safety of UK-manufactured goods in the future?

Kelly Tolhurst: I thank my hon. Friend for his question, and I absolutely agree. Consumer product safety is a key part of our industrial strategy. The Government are determined to maintain a strong safety regime, and consumers can be confident that consumer protections already based in EU law will be retained. We want robust systems that identify unsafe products, share information and make sure that the checks at our borders and ports are right.

Andy Slaughter (Hammersmith) (Lab): I am glad that the Government now take product recall seriously. They certainly did not in the case of the 5 million Whirlpool tumble dryers, many of which are still in our constituents’ homes. More catch fire every week, destroying peoples’ properties and putting their lives at risk. What will the Minister do about those?

Kelly Tolhurst: I thank the hon. Gentleman for his question; he raises an extremely important point. The Office for Product Safety and Standards is already reviewing Whirlpool’s recall programme. Some 1.7 million dryers have been replaced or maintained under the programme. We are keeping it under review, and we will report once that review has taken place.

Maggie Throup (Erewash) (Con): I welcome my hon. Friend to her new role. I also welcome the Government’s recent steps to improve the recall process. However, as the hon. Member for Hammersmith (Andy Slaughter) said, tumble dryers continue to be a leading cause of devastating house fires, as happened to my constituent in Long Eaton just last week. Will my hon. Friend look at what more can be done to improve the recall process, and more importantly, what more can be done to improve the rights of consumers who have purchased faulty products?

Kelly Tolhurst: I thank my hon. Friend for her question and express my condolences to her constituent over that horrific incident.

I assure my hon. Friend that the new Office for Product Safety and Standards takes this issue seriously. We are working with UK manufacturers on the recall process; we are keeping it under review. We want to make sure that the UK is recognised for having high standards and consumer protections, and my Department will continue to work on that.

Sainsbury’s and Asda: Merger

3. Mohammad Yasin (Bedford) (Lab): Whether he has made an assessment of the effect of the proposed merger of Sainsbury’s and Asda on the (a) pay, (b) conditions and (c) job security of the employees of those companies. [907072]

The Secretary of State for Business, Energy and Industrial Strategy (Greg Clark): Sainsbury’s has confirmed that there are no planned store closures as a result of the merger. The proposed merger of Sainsbury’s and Asda remains conditional on clearance by the Competition
and Markets Authority. I wrote to the CMA on the issue in May, and the Under-Secretary of State for Business, Energy and Industrial Strategy, my hon. Friend the Member for Rochester and Strood (Kelly Tolhurst) and I had a meeting with the chief executive of Sainsbury’s yesterday.

Mohammad Yasin: It is right that the concerns of the workers are heard during the Asda-Sainsbury’s merger, so does the Secretary of State agree that there is a pressing need for the Competition and Markets Authority to hear the worker’s voice and take into account the impact of any merger or takeover on the workforce, not just on the competition?

Greg Clark: It is true that the directors of the company have an obligation to have regard to the workforce. The CMA is independent of the Government, as the hon. Gentleman knows. It will make its report and assessment, and I am sure that it will look at all the companies’ responsibilities.

Theresa Villiers (Chipping Barnet) (Con): In taking forward this merger, will the Secretary of State urge Sainsbury’s to reaffirm its commitment to local suburban high streets, not least in New Barnet, where Sainsbury’s is a key store?

Greg Clark: I will indeed. Our supermarkets make an important contribution to our high streets, not least in New Barnet, where Sainsbury’s plays an important role on the high street.

Ellie Reeves (Lewisham West and Penge) (Lab): The Competition and Markets Authority says that it will not let the merger go ahead if any concerns that it has around higher prices or worse quality of service for shoppers are not fully dealt with. What assurances will the Secretary of State give that the same rigorous tests are being applied regarding the employment rights of employees at both companies, and will he commit to a meeting with the recognised trade unions?

Greg Clark: I am always very happy to meet the trade unions. As I have said, I met the chief executive of Sainsbury’s yesterday. The company intends to run the Asda and Sainsbury’s businesses separately. It does not propose store closures or changes to the terms and conditions of the separate employees.

Mr Philip Hollobone (Kettering) (Con): In the town of Kettering, there is a large Sainsbury’s and a large Asda, but local shoppers and supermarket employees are asking what guarantee there is that both supermarkets will still exist in two or three years’ time.

Greg Clark: My hon. Friend raises an interesting point. That is why the CMA is conducting its investigation, and it has powers to prevent the loss of competition if it is in prospect.

Jim Shannon (Strangford) (DUP): Will the Minister further outline what effect this merger will have on my constituents, who may see higher prices and less competition as a result of further limitation of the already smaller choice of supermarkets than on the mainland? Has the Department fully taken the likes of Northern Ireland and rural areas into consideration?

Greg Clark: The hon. Gentleman raises a very important question. The essence of the CMA investigation is to see whether there could be—not just nationally, but in particular places—any diminution of competition. If the CMA thinks that that is in prospect, it has the powers to block the merger or to place conditions on it, such as requiring the sale of businesses to a competitor.

Energy Prices

4. John Stevenson (Carlisle) (Con): What steps he is taking to tackle rising energy prices.

The Minister for Energy and Clean Growth (Claire Perry): My hon. Friend’s constituents are keen to invest in the energy transition, as well as to ensure that their bills do not go up. Earlier this year, we brought forward the price cap Bill, which received strong cross-party support, and we are looking forward to those provisions coming into place by the end of the year. We estimate that my hon. Friend’s constituents on the most expensive tariffs will save around £120. All the other steps that we are taking, including the roll-out of smart meters, the warm home discount, the energy company obligation—which is now focused on the most fuel-poor households—and our work with Citizens Advice and the Energy Saving Trust are helping to keep bills down.

John Stevenson: I thank the Minister for that positive response. Given that we as a society want carbon-free energy but also low energy costs, does she agree that requiring all newly built residential properties to incorporate solar panels would be a step in the right direction, and will she ask her Department to consider that initiative?

Claire Perry: My hon. Friend is quite right that solar PV has an important role to play in the energy system. It might be ideal on some existing or new build homes. What I hate to see is the tokenistic solar panel that some developers pop up on roofs. Obviously, there may well be more effective and expansive measures to reduce running costs and cut emissions. When the Prime Minister launched her buildings mission as part of the industrial strategy earlier this year, she targeted the measure of overall energy. We want to halve the energy consumption of all new buildings by 2030 and we are working closely with the construction sector to deliver that goal.

Anna Turley (Redcar) (Lab/Co-op): As Ministers know, the development corporation site in Redcar is critical to the economic development of the Tees valley, and to get international industrial investment, we need affordable energy supplies. Will Ministers review the current arbitrary limit of 100 MW on the amount of electricity that can be supplied by private wire networks so that we can bring in jobs and investment, and fulfil our potential?

Claire Perry: As always, I commend the hon. Lady and her colleagues for doing such an amazing job, cross-party, in promoting the next iteration of Teeside as the centre of clean economic growth. I know that the Secretary of State has met the company. We are aware of the issues. We will continue to review this, but we will
also continue to review the chance to have a low-carbon industrial cluster, which is the way to get the new investment and get the carbon down in the area she is so proud to represent.

Sir Desmond Swayne (New Forest West) (Con): The price comparisons available to the public are not transparent and often unintelligible. Can the system be made easier?

Claire Perry: My right hon. Friend is always seeking advice on how he can cut his energy bills. I am delighted to see that, particularly as it is Green GB Week. There are lots of opportunities on the website to see what more he could do. The price comparison websites are getting better. One of the challenges is that they do not always show consumers who are in receipt of a warm home discount whether they might lose that. That point was raised by the hon. Member for Leeds West (Rachel Reeves), who chairs the BEIS Committee, and we are working with it. We want that decision to be as transparent as possible. As somebody who has switched twice, both times using a price comparison website, I can tell my right hon. Friend that it is actually a much simpler process than it used to be.

Mr Speaker: I was rather hoping that the right hon. Gentleman would be minded to consult the meerkat.

Seema Malhotra (Feltham and Heston) (Lab/Co-op): The Minister will be aware that wholesale prices of gas and electricity have risen significantly in the past year. What protections will she be ensuring for people on lower incomes, from poorer families, or who are older citizens and may be worried about the winter, particularly those who may still be using prepayment, pay-as-you-go meters?

Claire Perry: It is quite right to note that the wholesale price determines the overall energy price, and of course it goes up and down. That is why the price cap Bill that we have all supported introduces a cap, not a freeze. I am sure that the hon. Lady is as pleased as I was to welcome the roll-out of the protection for customers on prepayment meters. That cap is already in place. It is already saving those households tens of hundreds of pounds a year. Indeed, the extension of the cap to the vulnerable consumers group is required by the CMA report. I would like to see these protections continue. Of course, all customers who are on rip-off tariffs will benefit when the price cap Bill we all worked so hard for comes into effect this year.

Drew Hendry (Inverness, Nairn, Badenoch and Strathspey) (SNP): Winter is almost upon us, yet those suffering most from fuel poverty in the highlands are still paying higher electricity charges than those anywhere else in the UK, despite living in a centre of energy production. When will the Minister act to end this electricity unit price discrimination, which is estimated to add £400 a year to the already high cost of rural living?

Claire Perry: The hon. Gentleman raises a point that is also often raised by MPs who represent other areas, such as the peninsula of Cornwall and Devon. There has always been a convention that because it costs more to deliver energy through conventional structures to those furthest parts of the UK, they bear a higher tariff. There is work ongoing, supported through BEIS innovation funding, to encourage self-generation and self-storage in many of the most remote communities—perhaps some of the things we have seen around the Orkneys with the hydrogen bus. The hon. Gentleman raises an important point. That is why the price cap Bill is so valuable and should be supported by all parties—because it caps energy prices for everyone in the UK.

Economic Growth and Emissions

5. Henry Smith (Crawley) (Con): What steps he is taking to support economic growth while decreasing emissions.

Claire Perry: This is a brilliant project and an example of exactly the innovation we need to tackle one of the most insurmountable problems we face, which is airline emissions. The Government relaunched last year a £22 million industry competition on future fuels for flight and freight to stimulate exactly this sort of innovative thinking.

Mr Bacon: Given that most people would prefer to live in a house that costs nothing to heat, boosting their spending power, that we have known for decades how to construct such houses cost-effectively and that there is no sign that big house builders will routinely offer such houses, are the Government planning to raise minimum standards for the thermal performance of new build houses, which will help the planet, the real economy and ordinary people’s household budgets?

Claire Perry: I have here a card with my hon. Friend’s title—he is the chair of the all-party parliamentary group on self-build, custom and community housebuilding and placemaking, and he speaks with such knowledge and enthusiasm on this subject. He is quite right, and that is why we have set up the clean growth mission, why we have set out clear standards to drive up the energy efficiency of all homes to at least band C by 2035 and...
why we can no longer see new homes—particularly new build homes—that are off the gas grid being built with fossil fuel heating; we want that out by 2025.

Thangam Debbonaire (Bristol West) (Lab): But does the Minister not agree that the two aims can be brilliantly combined if we have an ambition to become a world leader in renewable energy and to increase investment in research and development in tidal and wave energy—two resources we have in abundance—to take them rapidly to commercial stability and create the jobs of the future?

Claire Perry: The hon. Lady will be pleased to know that our renewable energy build is already over 30%, which is why we were able to get off coal earlier than many other developed countries. The problem with the tidal projects that we debated so extensively this year was that we were being asked to fund the most expensive power station that this country had ever built, with very few jobs created, and it was simply too expensive to burden consumers with. That is why we have said that the door is always open to innovation, but it has to be funded at the right price.

18. [907088] Jeff Smith (Manchester, Withington) (Lab): There is a huge opportunity for economic growth in the solar industry, but the news that the export tariff is being scrapped has alarmed many clean energy providers. More than 300 organisations, from small solar co-operatives up to Nissan, have signed a letter calling on the Secretary of State to reinstate the tariff. I am grateful to the Minister for meeting me in the past to discuss solar. Will she again meet me and representatives from the industry to discuss why a fair export tariff is essential to a viable solar industry?

Claire Perry: It is always a pleasure to meet the hon. Gentleman. The problem we have with feed-in tariffs is that we have spent nearly £5 billion since 2011, through consumer bills, on supporting some often very uneconomic projects. Quite rightly, particularly given the reduction in the cost of other renewable energies, the decision was made that that was no longer affordable. I support that. I believe that we have some of the most ambitious carbon reduction plans in the world up to 2032, set in statute. We need to know what to do from 2032 onwards, so that we can start planning for it now. Just once, it would be lovely to have some cross-party consensus on the challenging, vital issue of the destruction that climate change will cause. I live in hope.

Business in Scotland: Support

6. Neil Gray (Airdrie and Shotts) (SNP): What recent discussions he has had with the Chancellor of the Exchequer on the level of UK Government financial support available to businesses in Scotland. [907076]

The Secretary of State for Business, Energy and Industrial Strategy (Greg Clark): The Chancellor and I work closely together to support businesses across the United Kingdom. I also work with the Cabinet Secretary for Finance, Economy and Fair Work in the Scottish Government to ensure that we can create the right environment for innovative businesses throughout Scotland to thrive. Indeed, I will be meeting him again later this afternoon.

Neil Gray: I hope the Secretary of State has heard that the Scottish Government have provided £18 million as part of a £65 million package of investment for its National Manufacturing Institute, which will be good news for manufacturers in Airdrie and Shotts, so will he change his industrial strategy to match that funding?

Greg Clark: The industrial strategy is something on which we have good collaboration with the Scottish Government. It is right that we should work together for the long term. If we want to make sure that Scottish businesses can thrive, there needs to be a competitive environment. One thing that I know is very much on the minds of Scottish businesses is that Scotland is the highest taxed part of the United Kingdom, which is a substantial drain on confidence. I hope the hon. Gentleman will take that back to his colleagues and discuss it with them.

Mr Speaker: The hon. Member for Caithness, Sutherland and Easter Ross (Jamie Stone) has Question 21, which is on the matter of businesses, and he does come from Scotland. It therefore would be pertinent for him to come in at this point if he wishes.

21. [907002] Jamie Stone (Caithness, Sutherland and Easter Ross) (LD): Really first-class broadband connectivity is crucial to young people getting into business. Do Her Majesty’s Government recognise that the low level of broadband connectivity is a serious issue in my constituency?
Greg Clark: I do recognise that, not just in the case of hon. Gentleman’s beautiful but remote constituency but in the case of those of very many hon. Members across the country. This is a commitment that we have made in the industrial strategy. If we are to be a successful economy, using digital skills and attracting digital businesses, we need an upgrade in our broadband infrastructure.

Small Business: Finance

7. Gordon Henderson (Sittingbourne and Sheppey) (Con): What steps he is taking to improve access to finance for small businesses. [907077]

8. James Duddridge (Rochford and Southend East) (Con): What steps he is taking to improve access to finance for small businesses. [907079]

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Business, Energy and Industrial Strategy (Kelly Tolhurst): Improving access to finance is the mission of the British Business Bank, which addresses gaps in the finance market through guarantees and through debt and equity finance. The bank recently launched an online finance hub to help entrepreneurs identify the most suitable finance options for their needs. It is currently supporting about £5.2 billion of finance to almost 75,000 businesses across the United Kingdom.

Gordon Henderson: I thank my hon. Friend for her response. As somebody who campaigned to get her elected, may I say how good it is to see her on the Front Bench?

Small businesses play an important role in my constituency’s economy. Will my hon. Friend tell me what the Government are doing to tackle the late payment culture, which has such a negative effect on small businesses?

Kelly Tolhurst: I thank my hon. Friend for his kind words. It is great to be answering a question from him at my first Business, Energy and Industrial Strategy oral questions today. I know his constituency well, and I know that he represents the interests of his small businesses.

It is true to say that late payments are an issue that we want to tackle. Debt to small and medium-sized enterprises has halved since 2012. We have established a Small Business Commissioner, and introduced a requirement for large businesses to report publicly on their payment practices. However, we want to go further and bring in new measures to underpin the prompt payment code. We work closely with the Federation of Small Businesses, which has said that “it is good to see the government getting serious about this issue, especially when it comes to large firms paying their supply chains promptly.”

James Duddridge: What specific programmes are available to coastal businesses in towns such as Southend-on-Sea that not only benefit hospitality businesses but help high streets that are sometimes suffering?

Kelly Tolhurst: I thank my hon. Friend for his question, and I know what a champion he is particularly for that industry in his constituency. The coastal communities fund supports jobs and growth in coastal towns. Projects are forecast to deliver more than 18,000 jobs and £363 million in new visitor spending, benefiting local businesses along seafronts and in coastal towns. In England, the local enterprise growth hubs in coastal areas also provide local business support and advice. Retail and hospitality businesses in coastal towns benefit from those national programmes as much as they do from business rates relief, business improvement districts and the business support helpline.

Ian C. Lucas (Wrexham) (Lab): Social enterprises—for example, Wrexham football club—are important employers and active community hubs in a lot of constituencies up and down the country. It seems to me that banks do not support or understand social enterprises sufficiently well. Does the Minister agree?

Kelly Tolhurst: There are a range of options to support all kinds of SMEs and social enterprises in the current system. We have launched a finance hub which, with the British Business Bank, is available for organisations to get in touch with. A whole range of finance is available for different types of organisations. As MPs, we have a duty to make sure that our constituents and the businesses operating in our constituencies are aware of Government information, so that might be useful in future.

Several hon. Members rose—

Mr Speaker: Order. It is very good to see the hon. Member for Motherwell and Wishaw back in the House. As she knows, I once fought her constituency, but unfortunately for me it fought back. I call Mrs Marion Fellows.

Marion Fellows (Motherwell and Wishaw) (SNP): And it continues to fight, as do I. Thank you all.

Some of our most important small businesses are local post offices. In 2017-18, post office profits rose to £35 million, while postmaster pay was cut by £17 million. Communities and the Post Office are facing a crisis as more and more postmasters resign, as they are undervalued and underpaid while executives receive a pay rise. What are the UK Government going to do to support sub-postmasters and make their businesses financially viable?

Kelly Tolhurst: Fundamentally, the Government absolutely support the post office network, and we are determined to make sure that it is provided across the country. As the Minister with responsibility for post offices, I have taken a particular interest in that since taking up my role. I am determined to make sure that we keep the network running across all parts of the country to benefit our communities.

Bill Esterson (Sefton Central) (Lab): First, I welcome the Minister to the Dispatch Box.

The British Business Bank is simply not reaching most businesses that need support. Only 12% of members of the Federation of Small Businesses apply for external finance, and two thirds of those applications are rejected. In the spirit of cross-party co-operation, how about setting up a network of regional development banks to deliver business finance where it is most needed? The Government have stolen a number of our policies—why not that one?
Kelly Tolhurst: I must remind the hon. Gentleman that the British Business Bank has access to the £20 billion investment in the industrial strategy. Through our start-up loan scheme, we have made 57,000 loans, delivering £436 million in finance and creating more than 56,000 jobs. Access to finance has improved a great deal since I became an MP. The hon. Gentleman served on the Committee on which we made invoice financing another option for many small businesses.

Small Business: Rates

8. Sir Edward Davey (Kingston and Surbiton) (LD): What recent assessment he has made of the effect of business rates on the viability of small businesses.

[907078]

The Secretary of State for Business, Energy and Industrial Strategy (Greg Clark): The small business sector is thriving. We have 5.7 million small and medium-sized enterprises, and we are ranked in the top 10 in the world for ease of doing business. As the right hon. Gentleman knows, the Government have taken significant action on business rates in each of the last three Budgets, including £9 billion of support announced in 2016, making sure that nearly two thirds of a million small businesses pay no rates at all.

Sir Edward Davey: Small retailers across Kingston and Surbiton have been hit by a combination of high rises in business rates and unfair competition from online retailers, who too often escape taxation. Will the Secretary of State talk to the Chancellor before the Budget, and to European colleagues before Brexit, to agree a new tax for internet retail, using the proceeds to slash business rates and save our high streets before it is too late?

Greg Clark: When the right hon. Gentleman was a Minister in the Business Department, he took part in a decision to defer revaluation, for reasons that he understands. I accept the point—it has been made strongly by the Retail Sector Council—that reflecting the contribution that high street businesses make to their communities is a significant need. As business rates are reviewed, that is one of the council’s recommendations that we will take forward.

Derek Thomas (St Ives) (Con): The Secretary of State will know that I have been concerned about this issue for some time. I met a business on Saturday whose rates, which are currently about £300 a month, will go up to over £1,000 a month next April. What can I take to that business to assure them that we are on its side?

Greg Clark: My hon. Friend can reflect on the fact that the Government have taken action to permanently double business rates relief from 50% to 100% and to raise the threshold from £6,000 to £12,000. That means that a third of all properties, including small shops, now pay no business rates at all.

Nic Dakin (Scunthorpe) (Lab): With Small Business Saturday coming up on 1 December, I am sure everybody in this House will be celebrating their local small businesses. I will be launching my Small Business Saturday competition soon. Is it not a good opportunity to use the Budget to show that we are behind small businesses by doing something about business rates, which are hitting small businesses on the high street?

Greg Clark: I join the hon. Gentleman in drawing attention to Small Business Saturday, which is coming up. I am sure colleagues right across the House will want to enthusiastically promote businesses in their constituencies. I hope that, being a fair-minded Member, he will reflect on the major changes that have been made. As I said, the Retail Sector Council has made some suggestions for the future, and I am sure the Chancellor will be listening.

Sir Patrick McLoughlin (Derbyshire Dales) (Con): Does the Secretary of State believe there is a level playing field between high street providers and internet providers?

Greg Clark: I think it is well known, and my right hon. Friend is aware, that we have been one of the leading forces in the world in ensuring that the rules should be changed, so that companies that currently pay little tax because of international agreements make a fair contribution. There is more to be done, but my right hon. Friend served in Cabinets in which this was put at the top of the agenda, and some progress has been made.

Rebecca Long Bailey (Salford and Eccles) (Lab): I warmly welcome the Under-Secretary of State, the hon. Member for Rochester and Strood (Kelly Tolhurst), to her new role. I am sure she will do fantastically. All the major business representatives, from the CBI to the chambers of commerce and the Federation of Small Businesses, have highlighted the need for business rates reform and temporary relief. The CBI says:

“The...system is stifling growth and investment”,

and the FSB says it creates a significant barrier to small business growth. Can the Secretary of State confirm today whether there will be any action on this issue in the forthcoming Budget?

Greg Clark: The hon. Lady knows that decisions on the Budget are for the Chancellor, but one of the measures we have taken, which I hope she would acknowledge, is a very substantial reduction in the burden of business rates on small businesses. That shows that the Government are alive to the importance of business rates for small businesses. We of course listen constantly to the organisations she mentions, but also to the Retail Sector Council.

Rebecca Long Bailey: I suddenly have a sense of déjà vu. At the last autumn statement, business groups warned of the devastating effect of business rates. In return, we saw only minor tinkering. Since then we have had a raft of store closures, with more than 100,000 retail jobs lost in the past three years. Many businesses cite business rates as a root cause. The Secretary of State has reportedly said that adjusting business rates would be one way to recognise the value of our high streets, yet the Chancellor said in July that there were no plans for reform. Just what is going on? Will there be action, or should we expect another year of meaningless tinkering from the Chancellor?
Greg Clark: The hon. Lady knows, and retailers will tell her if she listens to them, that the change in the pattern of retail trade, as more of us are buying more goods online, is going to make a change to the high street. Everyone accepts that. Do business rates make a contribution, and can they help? Yes, of course. That has been behind the changes that have been made. I have said before, and I said it today, that it is reasonable for the taxation system to reflect the contribution that high street businesses make to communities.

Greenhouse Gas Emissions

10. Daniel Zeichner (Cambridge) (Lab): What his policy is on achieving net zero greenhouse gas emissions by 2050.

The Minister for Energy and Clean Growth (Claire Perry): As the hon. Gentleman will know, on Monday I wrote to the chair of the Committee on Climate Change for advice on how to get to a zero-carbon future. We did not ask for a specific date. We asked for advice on what date would be appropriate, as well as an analysis of the costs and benefits. I expect a response by next March. He will know, as the proud representative of one of the finest universities in the world, that so much of that change will be based on innovation and research, much of which is going on in his fine city. That is why we have contributed more than £2.5 billion during this Parliament to support that research, which can help us to save the planet.

Daniel Zeichner: I thank the right hon. Lady. Lady for her reply, but does she not understand that freezing fuel duty and cutting support for electric vehicles and hybrids is in no way going to help us to achieve the goal that we all want to arrive at?

Claire Perry: I know the hon. Gentleman’s city well and I commend the council there—it is the wrong colour, but it is making many good decisions on such things as solar bins, cycling and walking, which are very possible in a city such as Cambridge. In constituencies such as mine, people have to rely on their vehicles. We know that the cost of living is an issue and it is right that we continue to help people to put some money back in their pockets. On electric vehicles, 13% of new vehicles sold in August this year were ultra-low emission. That market is evolving and the cost of those vehicles is coming down. We have spent half a billion pounds of taxpayers’ money subsidising the purchase of those vehicles and my expectation is that the price will continue to fall faster as we see the infrastructure build up.

Industrial Strategy

11. Kevin Foster (Torbay) (Con): What progress he has made through the industrial strategy on ensuring that the UK is the best place to start and grow a business.

The Minister for Universities, Science, Research and Innovation (Mr Sam Gyimah): We are making the UK the best place to start and grow a business and a global draw for investors: for example, Green GB Week showcases fantastic opportunities in clean growth for businesses, as put forward in our industrial strategy. We have put in place the building blocks to drive £20 billion of investment into high-growth potential businesses and to support long-term investment across the UK.

Kevin Foster: I thank the Minister for his answer. Town deals are a welcome part of the industrial strategy. Yesterday, a delegation from Torbay Together met the Minister in the other place to discuss how a town deal for Torbay would make our bay the best place to grow and start a business. What view does the Minister take of such a deal for Torbay would help to deliver this objective of the industrial strategy?

Mr Gyimah: I am aware of the ambitions in Torbay and I am encouraged to see the high-level commitment from the Torbay Together partnership. I encourage Torbay Together to continue its engagement with the Heart of the South West local enterprise partnership to ensure that the forthcoming local industrial strategy reflects the potential for the local area, and I commend its strategy.

Justin Madders (Ellesmere Port and Neston) (Lab): UK shipbuilding is vital to the industrial strategy and our long-term economic success. When he visited Cammell Laird last year, the northern powerhouse Minister—the Under-Secretary of State for Housing, Communities and Local Government, the hon. Member for Rossendale and Darwen (Jake Berry)—said:

“The future of this yard is absolutely crucial to the future of Birkenhead and Liverpool and I will do all I can to support them.”

Since the decision was made last week to cut more than 290 high-skilled jobs—40% of the entire workforce—the silence from the Government has been deafening. What will the Government do to defend jobs in this vital industry?

Mr Gyimah: The Under-Secretary of State for Business, Energy and Industrial Strategy, my hon. Friend the Member for Watford (Richard Harrington), met and spoke to Cammell Laird last night. It has finished one contract and a number of other contracts are on the way. It has also received £150 million for projects that it is engaging in and the Minister will be delighted to meet the hon. Gentleman to update him.

Several hon. Members rose—

Mr Speaker: Order. I am sorry—time is against us. I call Jack Brereton.

Research and Development

12. Jack Brereton (Stoke-on-Trent South) (Con): What steps he is taking to increase levels of investment in research and development.

The Minister for Universities, Science, Research and Innovation (Mr Sam Gyimah): Research and development plays a vital role in improving productivity and helping us to expand our global opportunities. The Government are investing an additional £7 billion in R&D funding by 2022—this is the biggest increase in public funding. Our ambition is also to increase total R&D spend to 2.4% of our GDP by 2027, and 3% in the long term.
Jack Brereton: I thank the Minister for his response. Does he agree that the development of an advanced ceramics research park in Stoke-on-Trent would be a significant addition to the UK’s R&D capabilities?

Mr Gyimah: My hon. Friend is absolutely right. I understand that my colleague, the Under-Secretary of State for Business, Energy and Industrial Strategy, my hon. Friend the Member for Watford (Richard Harrington), is meeting with him and leaders from the ceramics sector on 24 October regarding its proposal for future investment. I wish them all the best.

Chris Elmore (Ogmore) (Lab): The Minister may be aware that there is a need for more research and development funding for geothermal energy projects, which I have previously raised with the Energy Minister. Will he set out what additional funding he will give to get more projects in line, such as the one in Caerau in my constituency?

Mr Gyimah: I commend the hon. Gentleman on what has been done so far. As I said, a record increase of funding is available for research and development, mainly through UK Research and Innovation. We also have the industrial strategy challenge fund, but in all that, we are looking for projects that are cost-effective and if those become available, we will be happy to fund them.

Nuclear Power

13. Trudy Harrison (Copeland) (Con): What steps he is taking to secure the future of nuclear power in the UK.

Richard Harrington: My hon. Friend is correct to bring this subject to my attention. The Ministry of Defence leads the submarine dismantling programme and my Department the civil dismantling programme. I talked to the Secretary of State for Defence only yesterday about co-operation between our Departments, because it will unlock significant opportunities for the UK economy, including exports and skills. Our Department is getting very good at decommissioning.

14. Lucy Powell (Manchester Central) (Lab/Co-op): All major forms of renewable energy, such as onshore and offshore wind and solar, are now cheaper than new nuclear, and energy storage is on a similar cost trajectory, so why are the Government wasting billions of pounds on nuclear power?

Richard Harrington: The hon. Gentleman should be aware that the Government have a responsibility to ensure a mixture of power sources. Nuclear has a role to play and makes a tremendous contribution to the economy, employing nearly 70,000 people, but renewables are also very important. It is all about a mix and ensuring that the country has secure green energy for the future.

Martin Whitfield (East Lothian) (Lab): As the Minister is aware, the Civil Nuclear Constabulary is an important element of the future of nuclear power. In December 2017, I asked about its pension arrangements, and I understand that we are still awaiting an equality impact assessment from the Minister’s Department. Will its staff have it for this Christmas?

Richard Harrington: As the hon. Gentleman may know, I like to give Christmas presents wherever possible. I have met the chief constable and representatives, and I have written to the Treasury. I cannot imagine what Santa will bring, but we are doing our best in the Department to resolve this issue.

Family-friendly Working

15. Mrs Anne-Marie Trevelyan (Berwick-upon-Tweed) (Con): What steps he is taking to secure the future of nuclear engineers?

Richard Harrington: My hon. Friend is absolutely right. I understand that my colleague, the Under-Secretary of State for Business, Energy and Industrial Strategy, my hon. Friend the Member for Watford (Richard Harrington), is meeting with him and leaders from the ceramics sector on 24 October regarding its proposal for future investment. I wish them all the best.

Mrs Trevelyan: Would the Secretary of State meet me and cross-party colleagues to progress the nuclear decommissioning of our out-of-service nuclear submarines, which are currently decaying in Plymouth, not only to maintain our world-leading skills in this vital nuclear sector, but to develop the export potential for this work, to help meet our global commitment to a cleaner planet and to ensure a continuing increase in the number of nuclear engineers?

Mr Gyimah: I commend the hon. Gentleman on what has been done so far. As I said, a record increase of funding is available for research and development, mainly through UK Research and Innovation. We also have the industrial strategy challenge fund, but in all that, we are looking for projects that are cost-effective and if those become available, we will be happy to fund them.
Does the Minister agree that one of the keys to unlocking the gender pay gap and family-friendly working practices is to raise the esteem in which part-time workers are held, so that they have the same pay, career progression and investment in training as other employees, and that perhaps if more fathers worked part time, we might raise that esteem further?

Kelly Tolhurst: The hon. Lady raises an important point. Part-time workers are a valuable part of our economy, and it is right that they be held in the same esteem as full-time workers. With our policies and announcements on flexible working, I hope that the Government can strengthen this and deliver what she seeks.

Topical Questions

T1. [907095] Ian C. Lucas (Wrexham) (Lab): If he will make a statement on his departmental responsibilities.

The Secretary of State for Business, Energy and Industrial Strategy (Greg Clark): This week, through more than 30 events, Green GB Week is celebrating the UK’s status as a world leader in clean growth. At the world’s first zero emission vehicle summit last month, we announced further investment in research and development relating to green vehicles, new batteries and low-carbon technology, as part of the Faraday challenge in our industrial strategy. That resulted in a pledge by the industry to invest half a billion pounds in those opportunities.

In addition, since we last met we have announced action to protect small businesses against unfair late payment terms imposed by larger firms. Alongside the Siemens chief executive Juergen Maier, I chaired the first meeting of the Made Smarter Commission, which will help to transform manufacturing through digital technologies. We have also announced that, to evaluate the impact of the industrial strategy in the years ahead, the Bank of England’s chief economist, Andy Haldane, will chair the Industrial Strategy Council.

Ian C. Lucas: A business took over Thomson Reuters in Wrexham a few weeks ago, and last Wednesday announced the redundancies of 300 skilled workers who had spent the last 10 years building it up. The jobs are being moved to India. In the context of Brexit, does the Secretary of State agree that we need to reconsider the takeover laws that apply in the United Kingdom, so the Secretary of State agree that we need to reconsider the plans for higher research and development spending, so that the world-class output of institutions such as York University, in my constituency, can rapidly find its way to the factory floor?

The Minister for Universities, Science, Research and Innovation (Mr Sam Gyimah): Realising the full economic and social benefits of the excellent research at our universities is at the heart of our industrial strategy. Through United Kingdom Research and Innovation, our industrial strategy challenge fund and the higher education innovation fund, excellent research can be commercialised and translated into businesses that create jobs and growth.

Gill Furniss (Sheffield, Brightside and Hillsborough) (Lab): Only last week, the publicly owned Post Office announced the closure of a further 74 Crown post offices. Although the Post Office has not disclosed all its spending for its franchising programme, the Communication Workers Union estimates that up to £30 million of public money will be spent on compromise agreements, with staff being paid to leave, as customers, local high streets and the jobs market suffer. Does the Secretary of State agree that the Post Office must be transparent about how much its franchising programme is costing the public purse?

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Business, Energy and Industrial Strategy (Kelly Tolhurst): On 11 October, the Post Office announced a plan to relocate 40 post offices in WHSmith stores. The overall number of post offices will not be reduced. WHSmith will also reach a franchise agreement for the 33 post offices that are already in its stores, so the total number of post offices operated by WHSmith in its stores is planned to rise.

T4. [907098] Colin Clark (Gordon) (Con): During Green GB Week, what steps is the Minister taking to minimise the negative impact on farmers of renewable energy incentives that are taking away valuable distillery and brewery by-products to be used in anaerobic digesters, thus potentially undermining the livestock industry not only in Scotland but in the rest of the United Kingdom?

The Minister for Energy and Clean Growth (Claire Perry) (Brighton, Kemptown) (Lab): My hon. Friend has made a valuable point. We have high sustainability criteria, but we must ensure that biofuels are sourced sustainably. We have asked the Climate Change Committee for a bioenergy report, which it will provide shortly, and which will give us new advice on questions of land use and the long-term best use of resources.

T2. [907096] Louise Haigh (Sheffield, Heeley) (Lab): Rather than listening to communities where shale gas applications have been made, the Government have continued to dismantle the hurdles over which fracking companies should be forced to jump. Will the Minister
confirm that she is now genuinely considering weakening the controls on earthquakes in relation to fracking companies?

Claire Perry: I can absolutely confirm that I am not considering weakening the monitoring controls on seismicity.

T5. [907099] Sir Henry Bellingham (North West Norfolk) (Con): The Minister will be aware that there has been a remarkable revival in the UK extractors and mining sector. What can he and the Secretary of State do to make sure these ventures are environmentally sustainable and command local community support?

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Business, Energy and Industrial Strategy (Richard Harrington): My hon. Friend is very well informed on matters to do with minerals, but this is topical questions, which require quick answers, so I would like very much to meet my hon. Friend and any other colleagues to discuss this issue in detail.

T6. [907100] Andy Slaughter (Hammersmith) (Lab): Last year, Shepherds Bush post office was moved out of the town centre into the back of a WHSmith store. We were promised that it would remain a Crown post office, but now it is one of the 74 that is going to be franchised. We also have three branches that are suspended, one for four years. Will the Government do anything about the running down of the post office network?

Kelly Tolhurst: As I have outlined, a number of stores are going into franchise agreements. It is important that we have a post office network that is fit for purpose and serves consumers as they currently are being. As Post Office Minister, I take that very seriously, but I am always happy to meet with the hon. Gentleman to discuss any particular concerns in his constituency.

T10. [907104] Bob Blackman (Harrow East) (Con): As we embark on a new nuclear future, it is vital that we have a workforce that is able to deliver the skills and capability. What action is my hon. Friend taking to ensure that young people in particular get the training and opportunities for a career in this wonderful industry?

Richard Harrington: I thank my hon. Friend for this question because it is absolutely relevant to our nuclear sector deal, which concentrates very much on the development of skills particularly for young people. I was most impressed on a recent visit to Hinkley Point C by how many young people are in training, particularly the increase in the number of young women involved in nuclear, and I know that will continue.

T7. [907101] Gareth Snell (Stoke-on-Trent Central) (Lab/Co-op): When will the Secretary of State be able to announce a sector deal for the ceramics industry? He will know of the benefits that can be brought to both Stoke-on-Trent and the industry with that deal, and if he is unable to give a date today, will he meet me so we can progress this issue, so that the next time I ask him in the House he can give me a date?

Richard Harrington: I have met several times with the industry to discuss a ceramics sector deal, and it is developing. I will be very pleased to meet the hon. Gentleman, as he knows, and with other colleagues with constituency ceramics industry interests.

Stephen Metcalfe (South Basildon and East Thurrock) (Con): As my right hon. Friend will know, our high streets face unprecedented challenges. Will he therefore join me in challenging the sharp practices of Smart Parking, which operates in the Westgate shopping centre in Basildon? Its charging and fining regime is damaging the viability of shops and fining thousands of people who have all tried to do the right thing.

Kelly Tolhurst: My hon. Friend raises an important point, and it is one of the issues we will be looking at with the Retail Sector Council. There is already the review by John Timpson into our high streets, but we need to keep track of this area. My hon. Friend will, as a local MP, champion the cause of his constituency, and I, as Small Business Minister, am acutely aware of the challenges facing our high streets.

Mr Gyimah: The hon. Gentleman will be aware that the Government are considering the Migration Advisory Committee proposals in full, but there is no cap on international students coming to study in this country. The university sector is one of the most successful sectors in this country and this Government will make sure we continue to support it.

Dame Caroline Spelman (Meriden) (Con): Given that the new generation of diesel engines are up to 90% cleaner, what can the Secretary of State do to help ensure that consumers are not penalised unfairly by vehicle excise duty and company car tax bands?

Greg Clark: My right hon. Friend is correct in making the point that the next generation of diesel engines are very much less polluting than their predecessors. The road to zero strategy makes it very clear that diesel will continue to have a role for some years to come, and for some journeys it will be a particularly appropriate choice. My right hon. Friend will understand that the overall tax regime is a matter for the Chancellor.

T9. [907103] Jessica Morden (Newport East) (Lab): The all-party group on steel and metal-related industries has written to the Chancellor ahead of the Budget calling for specific measures to help our steel industry. Will Ministers support these calls and when can we have a proper, much-needed sector deal for steel?

Richard Harrington: I am delighted to tell the hon. Lady that I am in regular communication with the steel industry about a sector deal, which is developing thanks to Jon Bolton, who is chairing it, and to Gareth Stace, the chief executive of UK Steel. I am optimistic that this will develop in a way that will please the hon. Lady.
Rebecca Pow (Taunton Deane) (Con) rose—

Mr Speaker: Ah yes! The voice of Taunton Deane.

Rebecca Pow: Preliminary talks are under way in Taunton Deane on the establishment of a digital geospatial centre, to maximise the expertise of the UK Hydrographic Office, which makes the world’s shipping maps. Is not this exactly the kind of unique high-tech enterprise that will open up job opportunities, and exactly the kind of worldwide collaboration that we ought to be including in the industrial strategy?

Mr Speaker: Very exciting, I must say! Let’s hear from the Minister.

Mr Gyimah: I agree, Mr Speaker. This is incredibly exciting and forward-looking, and the Department will be happy to give it every support it can.

Peter Kyle (Hove) (Lab): The UK is at the top of the global league for start-ups, but it is languishing at the bottom for scale-up. Is it not true that this is a black hole in the industrial strategy, because that is where productivity gains could be made? Why is the Secretary of State not acting on this?

Greg Clark: It is quite the opposite, and I am surprised to hear the hon. Gentleman say that. If he has read the industrial strategy, he will know that the commitment to scale-up is very prominent. I made reference earlier to the Made Smarter Commission that Juergen Maier is leading. Its purpose is precisely to diffuse the technology that the bigger firms have to those that are growing and scaling up.

David Duguid (Banff and Buchan) (Con): In this Green GB Week, will the Minister join me in recognising the work being done by the major oil and gas companies, through the oil and gas climate initiative? They are voluntarily making huge efforts and investments towards a lower carbon future.

Claire Perry: My hon. Friend is a strong defender of that industry, which is vital to the UK economy. He will know that those companies have set out their own pledges and that they have set out how they see world changing fundamentally. They are also investing heavily in the new technologies that they want to be part of the future.

Alison Thewliss (Glasgow Central) (SNP): The Department’s consultation on limited partnerships closed on 23 July. Scottish limited partnerships continue to be used for dirty money, to the absolute discredit of the country. When will the Minister do something about this?

Kelly Tolhurst: We acknowledge the reports that limited partnerships, particularly Scottish limited partnerships, have been misused. That is why we have consulted on proposals to tackle the issue and to modernise the law. In June 2017, Scottish limited partnerships were brought within the scope of the register of people with significant control, and since then there has been a fall of 80% in the registration of new partnerships.

Tom Pursglove (Corby) (Con): From this side of the House, I echo the calls for a steel sector deal. Would my hon. Friend like to visit the Corby steelworks to see for himself the difference that that would make?

Richard Harrington: I would be delighted to make that visit.

Mr Adrian Bailey (West Bromwich West) (Lab/Co-op): The chief executive of Jaguar Land Rover has said that a bad or no deal Brexit would cost the company more than £1 billion a year and threaten its future investment in the UK. Can the Minister explain how that can be avoided if the UK is outside the customs union?

Greg Clark: It can be avoided by having a good deal based on the White Paper that was published earlier in the summer and that the motor industry has strongly endorsed.

Several hon. Members rose—

Mr Speaker: I think we will have one more. I call Jim McMahon.

Jim McMahon (Oldham West and Royton) (Lab/Co-op): Thank you, Mr Speaker. I have been desperately trying to catch your eye. We have had a number of comments on post office relocations and closures. Will the Minister make it absolutely clear that relocating a post office to WHSmith does not save the services within it? Many have been massively downgraded at the point to which they have been relocated.

Kelly Tolhurst: As I have already outlined, we are committed to delivering a postal network that services the needs of our communities. If the hon. Gentleman has concerns relating to particular post offices, will he please contact me?

Sir Edward Davey (Kingston and Surbiton) (LD) rose—

Mr Speaker: Oh, very well, Sir Edward—blurt it out, man!

Sir Edward Davey: Thank you, Mr Speaker. May I bring to the Secretary of State’s attention the power that he has to mutualise Post Office Ltd to allow sub-postmasters and sub-postmistresses, and their customers, to have a share in their own Post Office? Will he look at this, because it would bring greater sustainability to the post office network?

Kelly Tolhurst: That is something I am more than happy to look at in my new role, but it is something that you could have done yourself—[Interruption.] Sorry, Mr Speaker! It is something that the right hon. Gentleman could have done when he was a Post Office Minister.

Mr Speaker: Well, anyway, the House is consumed by a state of jollity, and that is always much to be encouraged. Finally, I call Mary Robinson.

Mary Robinson (Cheadle) (Con): As increasing numbers of high street banks are closing, post offices offer a potential solution for communities suddenly left without
a branch facility. However, sub-postmasters are not yet able to carry out the full range of transactions that customers expect. What can the Minister do to help our post offices, which are vital to the survival of our high streets, to perform the banking functions that have been recommended?

Kelly Tolhurst: My hon. Friend is right that post offices are now so valuable to our high streets. There are lots of opportunities for post offices to develop further in providing services to their community. As the Minister with responsibility for post offices, I will do whatever I can to facilitate that.
Universal Credit

12.40 pm

Frank Field (Birkenhead) (Ind) (Urgent Question): We hope the length of time it took the Minister to get to his place is reflected in the roll-out of universal credit.

Mr Speaker: I am extremely grateful to the right hon. Gentleman but, at this stage, all he needs to do is to ask that the Minister makes a statement. The right hon. Gentleman will get his full opportunity ere long.

Frank Field: I always make that mistake. I apologise, Mr Speaker.

Mr Speaker: A thought for these new young Members. It is very difficult for the right hon. Gentleman but, in due course, when he is a bit more experienced—

Frank Field: I am just starting my career as an independent, but you are right, Mr Speaker.

The urgent question is: To ask the Secretary of State for Work and Pensions if she will make a statement on her Department’s proposed changes to the roll-out of universal credit.

The Minister for Employment (Alok Sharma): I note the precise wording of the urgent question. I have a great deal of respect for the right hon. Gentleman, who cares deeply about welfare matters and is an excellent Chair of the Select Committee on Work and Pensions. He, his Committee and the whole House have a right to hold the Government to account, and that includes the Department for Work and Pensions.

I do not wish to be unhelpful. However, some of the matters to which the right hon. Gentleman may allude are the subject of speculation in the media. There has been a great deal of speculation about universal credit over the past few days, and I cannot and will not comment on speculation.

When it comes to the roll-out, we have long said that we will take a slow and measured approach to managing migration, which is why we will continue to take a test-and-learn approach, acting on feedback and improving the system as it rolls out.

Universal credit will be in every jobcentre in the country by December 2018. People making new claims to our benefits system now apply for universal credit, rather than being put on the old system. Next year, we will start the wider process of moving people from the old benefits system on to universal credit. The process will begin later next year in a measured way, with no more than 10,000 people moved over, to ensure that the system is working well for claimants and to make any necessary adaptations as we go.

We have said for a long time that the managed migration process will take place from 2019 to 2023.

Frank Field: I think I am grateful for that answer. I will be more grateful if we get answers to my five questions, which I will put in the two minutes I am allowed.

Will the Government commit themselves to ensuring that everybody who is transferred from the existing benefits on to universal credit is not made worse off, does not lack income and does not face hunger or destitution? First, to that end, will the Minister guarantee that existing benefit payments will continue to claimants until they pick up universal credit?

Secondly, on debt recovery, a welcome rumour has been given to the papers of a reduction in clawback from 40% to 30%, but that is only on the advance payments people might receive to prevent hunger and destitution; it does not cover all other debts. People can still be left with no money. Will the Minister guarantee to the House that nobody will face a situation where their debt repayments cancel out their benefit payments?

Thirdly, will the Minister implement the Select Committee’s recommendations to ensure that those brave people who have chosen self-employment to try to free themselves from poverty are encouraged, not discouraged?

Fourthly, for mothers already on universal credit who find work, will he guarantee that their childcare payments will be made up front, and not a month in arrears?

Fifthly, given that this benefit is designed for people on monthly payments and not for poorer working people who get their income on a daily or weekly basis, will the Minister wish me luck when I meet the Secretary of State this afternoon to discuss our need for a citizens bank, which will help people manage their money, once all those reforms are in place, and ensure that none of them faces hunger, destitution or losing their home?

Alok Sharma: I thank the right hon. Gentleman for his comments, and perhaps I may go through them in turn. He raised the overall issue of managed migration. As he knows, we have made our draft proposals available to the Social Security Advisory Committee; they have been public and people can see them. We have received recommendations from the SSAC and in due course we will publish our feedback on those. As for ensuring the position of anyone currently on benefits when they are transferred across, we have made it very clear that transitional protection is in place for those individuals. We have also said that the 500,000 people on a severe disability premium will be protected. As he knows, earlier this year we also implemented £1.5 billion of extra support. I say not in anger but in sorrow that Opposition Members did not support those proposals, and I hope that when it comes to managed migration, they will. On debt recovery, he talked about a “rumour” and I am not going to comment on rumours, but, as he knows, maximum deductions are currently 40% of the standard allowance. On self-employment, we are indeed helping people; as he knows, from 2017 we introduced a new enterprise allowance, and we are making sure that we are giving support to people to help them to develop their business plans and to grow their businesses—as a party that is the champion of entrepreneurs, that is absolutely the right thing for us to do. He will of course know that up to 85% of childcare costs are recoverable under universal credit, and that is an important improvement that has been made. I am sure that he will find his meeting with the Secretary of State extremely useful.

Several hon. Members rose—

Mr Speaker: There is heavy pressure on time, with two further urgent questions to follow. There will of course also be a debate on this important matter tomorrow.
It may not be possible to accommodate everybody, but the chances of doing so will be better if we have pithy questions, to be exemplified by the hon. Member for North East Somerset (Mr Rees-Mogg).

Mr Jacob Rees-Mogg (North East Somerset) (Con): The aim of getting the withdrawal rate of benefits down from more than 90% to 63% is enormously laudable, but can my hon. Friend ensure that people do not lose out in the transition?

Alok Sharma: My hon. Friend is absolutely right; under the legacy benefits system, some people did face effective tax rates of 90% and that system also disincentivised people from work. As I have said, those on legacy benefits that we manage migrate across will of course receive transitional protection.

Margaret Greenwood (Wirral West) (Lab): Universal credit is causing severe hardship for many people claiming it, and over the past two weeks conflicting statements from the Government have caused real confusion over the impact it will have on people who are required to move across to claim it in the next phase. First, we were told that austerity is over and then that families on low income are in danger of losing up to £200 a month as a result of transferring to UC. Next, the Prime Minister said that nobody would be worse off, but the Secretary of State contradicted her the following day by confirming that in fact some families would be worse off. So will the Government now publish their impact assessments of that next phase? How many households currently claiming legacy benefits will be worse off between now and 2023 as a result of making a claim for UC?

Yesterday, the Secretary of State met criticism of UC with accusations of scaremongering. So can the Minister tell us: are Citizens Advice, the Child Poverty Action Group, the National Association of Welfare Rights Advisers, the Residential Landlords Association, the National Housing Federation, the Resolution Foundation, the National Audit Office, two former Prime Ministers and more than 80 organisations representing disabled people scaremongering? From these Benches, we again call on the Government to stop the roll-out of UC now.

Alok Sharma: It is interesting that the hon. Lady talks about confusion. Let me be absolutely clear: there is no confusion on the Government Benches; the confusion is on the Opposition Benches. The shadow Chancellor talks about abolishing universal credit and others talk about reforming it. There is no clarity at all from the Opposition. They oppose everything but they have the solution to nothing.

When it comes to hardship, as I just said we introduced an extra £1.5 billion, but the hon. Lady did not vote for or support that. When it comes to protecting people, I have already made it clear that we will have transitional protection and that there will be protection for the half a million people on severe disability premium. I do not know what the hon. Lady wants, but if she wants to go back to the legacy benefit system, she should know that 700,000 people in this country are not getting the benefits that they require. That is £2.4 billion of underpayment and that will change under universal credit. Finally, the hon. Lady talks about Citizens Advice; I hope that she will welcome the partnership we recently announced with Citizens Advice to help the very vulnerable.

Tom Pursglove (Corby) (Con): More women in work, youth unemployment hugely down and record low unemployment not seen since the 1970s; what role has universal credit played in the delivery of that success?

Alok Sharma: I was in the House in 2010 when the Conservatives had to come in to sort out the mess left by the previous Government. Labour Members told us that as a result of our policies, there would be a million fewer jobs, but there are more than 3 million more jobs. They should welcome today’s jobs figures. My hon. Friend is absolutely right that unemployment is at its lowest level since 1975, youth unemployment is at a record low—it has more than halved since 2010—and wages are outpacing inflation for the seventh month in a row.

Several hon. Members rose—

Mr Speaker: Order. The House is in quite an excitable state. This is a matter of the utmost seriousness and there is passion, which I respect, but I am keen to accommodate as many people as possible. I call Mr Philip Hollobone.

Mr Philip Hollobone (Kettering) (Con): The roll-out of universal credit reaches Kettering tomorrow—

Mr Speaker: I beg the hon. Gentleman’s pardon. This is the trouble when there is a lot of noise. It is everybody else’s fault, not mine. [Laughter.] No, it is my fault and I apologise to the hon. Gentleman. I shall come to him. I call Neil Gray.

Neil Gray (Airdrie and Shotts) (SNP): Thank you for granting this urgent question, Mr Speaker.

In spite of what the Minister has just said, which I think was a return to the flat-earth rhetoric referred to by the BBC’s Michael Buchanan, it appears that the Secretary of State is finally starting to recognise what her predecessors failed to recognise: the fundamental problems with universal credit. Of course, just delaying the process, or reducing the clawback rate, as has been rumoured, will not fix the misery that is being faced in areas where universal credit has already been rolled out, such as Airdrie and Shotts, or in those areas progressing to roll out, such as Glasgow, Edinburgh and Aberdeen.

Yesterday, the Secretary of State hinted to me that she has made requests of the Chancellor for additional funding in the upcoming Budget. In that regard, the Chancellor should really be sitting with the Minister, listening to proceedings on how to make universal credit work. It appears that moves are afoot to change universal credit. If the Minister will not comment on rumours, why will he not be straight with the House now and tell us what the plans are? Does he not agree with the many concerned expert groups listed by the shadow Secretary of State that have called for a halt to the roll-out, dramatic and fundamental intervention in the Budget and a full review of universal credit thereafter?

Alok Sharma: As I have said and suspect I will have to keep saying, I am not going to comment on rumours. The Secretary of State was clear yesterday that matters relating to the Budget are for the Chancellor and the Prime Minister. Indeed, the Chancellor will be here in a
couple of weeks and the hon. Gentleman can ask questions then. I have already set out our plans for managed migration. If the hon. Gentleman is keen for universal credit to work properly, he should support the measures that we have introduced and will be bringing in to support the most vulnerable. The shadow Secretary of State talked about the £1.5 billion; the debate was on 13 March this year and she did not support the £1.5 billion for the most vulnerable.

Mr Hollobone: The roll-out of universal credit reaches Kettering tomorrow. Some 530 local households currently receive universal credit, but 7,700 households on legacy benefits will qualify. Will the Minister assure my constituents that all the staff training and systems are in place at Kettering jobcentre to ensure a smooth migration?

Alok Sharma: When we actually do roll out universal credit—as I have said, it will be completed across all jobcentres by the end of the year—we absolutely ensure that full training is given to our work coaches. Of course, local Members of Parliament are invited in to have discussions with jobcentres. I have been with colleagues to several jobcentres where universal credit is about to be rolled out and they have been satisfied with the roll-out process. On managed migration, that will take place from 2019 to 2023 and we will make sure that we get our processes absolutely right.

Ms Angela Eagle (Wallasey) (Lab): Universal credit rolled out in Wirral at the beginning of the year, and in the first six months of this year there was a 34% increase in food bank use in the Wirral area. That is more than 30 tonnes of extra food needed, and the people who work in the food bank tell me that that is a direct result of the universal credit roll-out. If everything is so wonderful, why is this happening and why are we not delivering on the promises that were made?

Alok Sharma: If the hon. Lady was so keen to help her constituents, she would have voted for the extra £1.5 billion of support, but she did not. Labour Members cannot get away from that. Members cannot call for help for their constituents—for all our constituents—and then not deliver when it comes to the votes. As the hon. Lady knows, the all-party group on hunger published a detailed report on this issue and concluded that there are myriad complex reasons for the use of food banks. It cannot be attributed to a single reason.
I am not going to create policy at the Dispatch Box. Policy decisions will be put out in the appropriate manner as they are made.

Chris Stephens (Glasgow South West) (SNP): What message does the Minister have for beleaguered DWP staff? A trade union briefing sent to MPs yesterday tells a sorry tale of staff having to deal with so many telephone calls that universal credit claims are not being maintained and payments are being delayed.

Alok Sharma: I wager that I have been to rather more jobcentres than the hon. Gentleman, and I invariably hear from jobcentre staff that things are working well. However, where we can improve, we do, and staff can feed back about improvements. That is what the “test and learn” process is all about.

Kevin Foster (Torbay) (Con): Universal credit was rolled out in Torbay last month, and I have so far seen a reduction in casework from those who have experienced housing benefit delays, for example, and those who have received demands for overpaid tax credits. Will the Minister outline how he is monitoring the roll-out in Torbay and how he will ensure that it continues to be a success?

Alok Sharma: My hon. Friend is assiduous at talking to local jobcentres and acting on his constituents’ behalf. We, of course, have a process whereby jobcentres can feed back information on some of the key metrics, which we monitor regularly.

Debbie Abrahams (Oldham East and Saddleworth) (Lab): Given that no lessons whatsoever seem to have been learned from the roll-out of full service universal credit since last year, how on earth would just slowing down the roll-out stop the misery, deprivation and even destitution that millions are facing?

Alok Sharma: We are learning as we go along, which is what the “test and learn” process is all about. I hope that the hon. Lady will appreciate the roll-out of the landlord portal and the ability to upload childcare costs. The changes we are making are helping the very poorest people before full migration from legacy benefits?

Alok Sharma: As I said both earlier and yesterday, the reason why we ensured that people can get 100% of their advance up front and an extra two-week run-on of housing benefit was to help them with their cash flows. The vast majority of people in this country are paid monthly, and the whole point is that we are replicating the world of work.

Vicky Ford (Chelmsford) (Con): On 5 December in my constituency, people on UC live—about 660 people—will transition to full-service UC. As claimants move to full-service UC, will the Minister confirm that they will see no change in their benefits? Will he also confirm that he will meet specialists, such as those from the charity Mind, to ensure that there is support for disabled people before full migration from legacy benefits?

Alok Sharma: As I said, I am in the process of meeting stakeholders, and I have indeed met Mind, as have other colleagues. We will of course ensure that we do everything that we can to take care of the vulnerable.

Alex Cunningham (Stockton North) (Lab): Yesterday, I raised an issue affecting a constituent who lost her regular universal credit payment because two months’ wages, paid on the last day of consecutive months, were taken into account, but the Under-Secretary of State for Work and Pensions, the hon. Member for North Swindon (Justin Tomlinson), dismissed my question. Will Ministers now investigate that anomaly, which is affecting countless people, and put the matter right?

Alok Sharma: The hon. Gentleman can write to me, or I am happy to discuss that particular case.

Several hon. Members rose—

Mr Speaker: A sentence from Bexhill and Battle.

Huw Merriman (Bexhill and Battle) (Con): Will the Minister give all the work coaches a big pat on the back? They will be disappointed as they listen to this type of spectacle, but they work incredibly hard to turn people’s lives around.

Alok Sharma: My hon. Friend is right. Work coaches across the country work incredibly hard, and I wish that Opposition Members would sometimes praise them, rather than denigrating the system.

Several hon. Members rose—

Mr Speaker: Ooh, this is difficult. Blaenau Gwent or Darlington? I call Jenny Chapman.

Jenny Chapman (Darlington) (Lab): The right choice, Mr Speaker.

The Minister’s tone this afternoon is very abrasive, and he does not seem to be listening to genuine concerns from Members on both sides of the House. We understand that the Government may want to save some announcements for the upcoming Budget, but I would have thought that the extent of concern about universal credit from across the country would have led him to make some solid announcements before then so that we can reassure our constituents.
Alok Sharma: I have no wish to be abrasive, and if I have been, I of course apologise. However, the appropriate time to talk about any financial measures is at the Budget, as I have said. Such matters are for the Chancellor and the Prime Minister, and there will be an opportunity in a couple of weeks’ time for Members to raise their points of view when the Chancellor comes to the House.

James Cartlidge (South Suffolk) (Con): We hear today that Britain has just seen the strongest growth in wages for nine years. We should make real work pay through stronger real wages, not by going back to the bad old days of unsustainable growth in the benefits bill.

Alok Sharma: My hon. Friend is right. Regular wages are up 3.1% this year, and I agree that we now have a system in place whereby work pays. The analysis that we have published shows that people get paid more under universal credit.

John Woodcock (Barrow and Furness) (Ind): Universal credit is due to be rolled out in Barrow just three weeks before Christmas this year—the worst possible time—and there is currently no certainty that debt relief will be provided for the area. Will the Minister rethink and postpone the roll-out?

Alok Sharma: The roll-out in Reading, which I represent, took place prior to Christmas last year. There were no issues, and I very much hope that things will be the same in the hon. Gentleman’s constituency, but I am happy to have a discussion to ensure that he is talking to his jobcentre and that he gets the comfort he needs.

Nigel Huddleston (Mid Worcestershire) (Con): There is strong support for the principles and intent of universal credit among not only Conservative Members, but my constituents. However, the Minister can be assured that if more money or further changes to universal credit are made, my constituents expect universal credit.

Alok Sharma: As I have said, we are taking a “test and learn” approach to universal credit. We make changes when we are required to do so, and I have talked about some of the changes that we have made. My hon. Friend mentions money, but as I have said, the proper time to have any such discussions is at the Budget, and such matters are ultimately for the Chancellor and the Prime Minister.

David Linden (Glasgow East) (SNP): The Minister will recall that I have invited him several times to meet my local housing associations, which expect universal credit to be rolled out in December. When will he come to Glasgow to hear the message that he needs to halt the roll-out of universal credit and fix it?

Alok Sharma: I apologise if I have not been to Scotland yet—I hope I will put that right in near time—but I have been going up and down the country to jobcentres, talking to people, and I have to say to the hon. Gentleman that universal credit is working.

Bob Blackman (Harrow East) (Con): Universal credit replaces six complex benefits, some of which are mutually exclusive. My hon. Friend the Minister has confirmed that 700,000 people do not claim the benefits that they are entitled to. When universal credit applies to those people, how much on average will they gain?

Alok Sharma: My hon. Friend is right: people have been underpaid benefits. On average, households will gain £285 a month. Under the previous system, 1.4 million people spent a decade trapped on benefits instead of being helped into work. That is changing under universal credit.

Lucy Powell (Manchester Central) (Lab/Co-op): During yesterday’s Work and Pensions questions, I raised with the Minister for Disabled People, Health and Work cases of my constituents who were not in receipt of transitional protection during a change of circumstances. The Minister told me I was wrong. I double-checked those cases with the Library and with others—I have dozens of similar cases—and it was not me who was wrong but the Minister. I think that there is a desire that such people will get that protection, but they do not at the moment. If Ministers do not know their policy, how can the rest of us have confidence in universal credit?

Alok Sharma: To clarify, what will happen under universal credit, once we pass the regulations—[Interruption.] What will happen under managed migration, when we pass the regulations, is that anyone who is currently—[Interruption.] If I may explain, anyone on legacy benefits who is moved across to universal credit will have transitional protection.

Mr Marcus Jones (Nuneaton) (Con): The principles of universal credit are sound. Only a small number of people have come to my office to challenge it, and when there have been challenges, the Government have clearly listened. Will the Government continue to listen to issues raised by Members and look to refine the system to make sure that we get this absolutely right for people?

Alok Sharma: We are a listening Department in a listening Government, as we have shown with universal credit.

Anna Turley (Redcar) (Lab/Co-op): Universal credit is due to be rolled out in Redcar and Cleveland on 28 November—just before Christmas, as my hon. Friend the Member for Barrow and Furness (John Woodcock) said. Will the Minister guarantee today that none of the 11,000 households that are due to be transitioned, of which 6,000 include children, will be financially worse off? If he cannot guarantee that, will he stop the roll-out now?

Alok Sharma: Universal credit is a new benefit that simplifies the system. Ultimately, this is about having a system that helps the most vulnerable, that is fair to the taxpayer, that is sustainable and, importantly, that helps people into work and to get better-paid work. That is precisely what we are doing through universal credit.

Stephen Lloyd (Eastbourne) (LD): I thank the right hon. Member for Birkenhead (Frank Field) for securing this important urgent question. There has been movement from the Government on the gig economy for the self-employed, which pleases me because I have advocated for a few years, including when I was in the coalition.
There has also been movement on making rental payments to private sector landlords, which again I am pleased about, as it was something I advocated. In that spirit of positivity, will the Minister acknowledge that if the Chancellor were to replace the work allowance money that was cut in 2015 by the previous Chancellor, it would make a substantial difference to the success of universal credit?

Alok Sharma: I am pleased that the hon. Gentleman outlines some of our positive changes, which prove that “test and learn” works. I am sorry to disappoint him once again, but those are matters for the Chancellor and the Prime Minister, and we will hear more about the Budget at the appropriate time.

Catherine McKinnell (Newcastle upon Tyne North) (Lab): I secured a debate on universal credit 18 months ago to highlight the misery it had caused in Newcastle, as a pilot area. The misery continues: rent arrears in social housing have doubled; private landlords will not accept universal credit claimants; and the city council has spent £750,000 supporting vulnerable claimants. What is the point of a pilot if the Government continue to roll out the misery regardless?

Alok Sharma: On rent arrears, the hon. Lady may have seen the report produced by the National Federation of ALMOs—I believe it came out in July—which stated that, of their tenants moving on to universal credit, 76% were already in arrears. That was before they moved on to universal credit. We introduced changes with the extra £1.5 billion to help people moving from housing benefit with their cash flow, giving them a two-week run-on, which does not have to be repaid. It is possible under universal credit to have alternative payment arrangements with payments made directly to landlords.

Ms Karen Buck (Westminster North) (Lab): Has the Minister also seen the research that was published yesterday by the Residential Landlords Association, which found that two thirds of private landlords are concerned about universal credit tenants falling into arrears and that the average arrears owed has doubled in the last year? What urgent action will he take to resolve that problem?

Alok Sharma: As I said, we are rolling out the landlord portal for social housing, which is working. It is also possible for alternative payment arrangements to be put in place for tenants of private landlords—that is part of the system.

Ben Lake (Ceredigion) (PC): Universal credit full service reaches Ceredigion in December. Further to questions asked by other Opposition Members, does the Minister share our concern that, just when it will be needed most, our constituents will have limited access to support, as services will be reduced over the festive period?

Alok Sharma: Again, I am happy to discuss the hon. Gentleman’s concerns with him and his jobcentre staff to make sure that he gets the assurances that he wants.

Mr Clive Betts (Sheffield South East) (Lab): The Minister failed to answer the question from my hon. Friend the Member for Redcar (Anna Turley), so I will ask it again. When universal credit is rolled out in Sheffield next month, will he guarantee that none of my constituents will be worse off?

Alok Sharma: I repeat my previous answer: it depends on people’s individual circumstances. This new benefit system is ultimately about making sure that we help people into work. I have to say that, under the last Labour Government, many people were trapped on benefits, but that is changing.

Alan Brown (Kilmarnock and Loudoun) (SNP): The National Audit Office says that there is no way of measuring outcomes of the universal credit roll-out, yet the Government and Government Members peddle the myth that universal credit somehow magics people into jobs. Will the Minister therefore explain why 930 more people are now registered as unemployed in my constituency compared with a year ago—a 54% increase?

Alok Sharma: I do not know whether the hon. Gentleman is referring to the claimant count, but people both in and out of work receive universal credit. I encourage him to look at the universal credit business case that we produced, which shows that, as a result of the universal credit roll-out, another 200,000 people will be in work.

Mr Pat McFadden (Wolverhampton South East) (Lab): Wolverhampton Homes, which runs council housing in Wolverhampton, reports that 67% of universal credit claimants are in rent arrears and that those rent arrears are going up by £60,000 a month. Will the Minister call a halt to the roll-out until the problems of debt, stress and, possibly, impending homelessness are addressed?

Alok Sharma: We have put in support for individuals—I have talked about that. Of course, also very importantly, we now have this partnership with Citizens Advice, which is a respected, nationwide, independent organisation. It is there to help and assist the most vulnerable.

Rushanara Ali (Bethnal Green and Bow) (Lab): The two-child policy limiting the financial support to low-income families has already affected 400,000 children, making their families £4,000 a year worse off. When it is eventually rolled out through universal credit, some 3 million children will be affected. Will the Minister commit today to scrapping this abhorrent part of the wider welfare policy?

Alok Sharma: Universal credit is a welfare system that is about being fair to the most vulnerable people and to taxpayers, and being sustainable. The reason for that policy is that taxpayers face similar choices. It is important to say that we have exemptions in place, which will include kinship carers.

Patrick Grady (Glasgow North) (SNP): If the system is such a success, will the Minister explain why everyone—whether constituents or those from advisory services—who came to my special surgeries at the start of this month were so concerned? Is not it the fact that the austerity that is hard-wired into universal credit has been an ideological choice for years? Will the Government therefore now make the choice to pause universal credit in Glasgow and elsewhere until these issues are sorted out?
Alok Sharma: I would be happy to hear from the hon. Gentleman about where he has found that his constituents have issues getting on to universal credit, and I will take up those individual cases.

Emma Reynolds (Wolverhampton North East) (Lab): Can we take it from the Minister’s answers to the questions of my hon. Friends the Members for Redcar (Anna Turley) and for Sheffield South East (Mr Betts) that he is admitting to the House that people are being made worse off as a result of universal credit?

Alok Sharma: I have said that under universal credit we have a system that is finally delivering for the most vulnerable and for taxpayers, that is sustainable and that—above all—is helping people into work. That means that people get into work faster, they stay in work longer and, really importantly, they earn more.

Steve McCabe (Birmingham, Selly Oak) (Lab): Yesterday, the Under-Secretary of State for Work and Pensions, the hon. Member for North Swindon (Justin Tomlinson), promised the House that, under managed migration, vulnerable people would be guaranteed a face-to-face interview. When will trials of that approach start so that we can all test and learn whether the Government are getting it right?

Alok Sharma: We are of course talking to the key stakeholders, particularly those who deal with the most vulnerable people, and we want to ensure that we put in place processes to support them. We are thinking very deeply about this matter.

Nick Smith (Blaenau Gwent) (Lab): How many families will see their universal credit incomes fall by up to £200 a month?

Alok Sharma: As I have said, we have a system of universal credit that is about being fair to the most vulnerable and taxpayers and that is sustainable. The hon. Gentleman will know that changes made previously were voted on in the general election in 2015 and in this House in 2016. The key thing is to ensure that we are supporting the most vulnerable people. Under managed migration, we will give protections to those who are migrating across from legacy benefits; 1 million disabled households will gain and half a million people on severe disability premium will also be protected.

Janet Daby (Lewisham East) (Lab): The DWP has no process in place to identify people with high support needs and instead relies on claimants to self-identify. What will the Minister do to ensure that disabled claimants who experience difficulties making a claim will not be left without the support and finance that they need?

Alok Sharma: People will get one-to-one support under universal credit. They have an opportunity to have a discussion with their work coach and develop that relationship, meaning that they can be signposted to the support that they need. It is working.

Neil Coyle (Bermondsey and Old Southwark) (Lab): Universal credit was introduced with three principles: it was supposed to simplify the system, but more than 300,000 people will be paid late this year through no fault of their own; it was supposed to save money, but it costs three times as much to administer; and it was supposed to get people into work, but the NAO states clearly that the Government “will never be able to measure” whether they have achieved that goal. What went wrong and who has taken responsibility for this failure?

Alok Sharma: It is interesting that the hon. Gentleman talks about employment on the day that we have reached a record low level of unemployment since 1975. The policies of this Government are clearly working: 80% of first payments are made fully and on time; in some cases, that figure gets up to 90%. It is important that we get the right information from people to be able to verify their costs. If we are able to do that, payments are made.

Patricia Gibson (North Ayrshire and Arran) (SNP): Despite the Minister’s responses today, universal credit is causing chaos, hardship and unnecessary suffering to people in my constituency as they seek to access essential support. Will he accept my invitation to visit my constituency to discuss the challenges of universal credit with my constituents so he can explain to them why he believes that universal credit is working?

Alok Sharma: I do visit jobcentres in different parts of the country. If the hon. Lady would like, we could have a discussion with the people in her jobcentre who are delivering this service; I am happy to arrange a call together with her.

Louise Haigh (Sheffield, Heeley) (Lab): Now that the Minister has confirmed that some people will be worse off when universal credit rolls out in Sheffield on 7 November, will he make it clear to the House exactly who those people will be?

Alok Sharma: People’s individual circumstances determine what they get under any benefit system. The point of the urgent question was to talk about the whole process of roll-out and managed migration. As I said, when people migrate across under managed migration, they will receive transitional protection.

Several hon. Members rose—

Mr Speaker: Order. I am happy to call all remaining colleagues wishing to pose a question, as long as their standing up signifies their acceptance that they will ask a single-sentence question.

Hugh Gaffney (Coatbridge, Chryston and Bellshill) (Lab): Speculation, rumours, confusing—mentioned by the Minister earlier. Was that the “Dancing Queen” speech about austerity being over?

Alok Sharma: I apologise; I did not hear the hon. Gentleman’s question clearly. I think he talked about rumours, which I will not be commenting on.

Drew Hendry (Inverness, Nairn, Badenoch and Strathspey) (SNP): Five years after the start of the universal credit pilot in Inverness, Highland Council has had a £2.5 million bill for administering universal...
credit, paid by every single household in the highlands. When will the Minister respond to Highland Council’s request—and mine—to pay that money back?

**Alok Sharma**: There is a new burdens policy in place, and the DWP has paid out to local councils. I believe that the figure for 2017-18 was around £13 million. If the hon. Gentleman forwards me the correspondence, I would be happy to look at it.

**Ellie Reeves** (Lewisham West and Penge) (Lab): Last Wednesday marked World Mental Health Day. The Mental Health Nurses Association stated in its letter to the Secretary of State that universal credit “will make matters much worse, especially for those living with mental ill health.”

Given the stress, uncertainty and poverty caused by universal credit, is it not time to scrap the roll-out?

**Alok Sharma**: My ministerial colleagues and I have regular discussions with key stakeholders, particularly those representing the most vulnerable. We will continue to do that, and we will work with them to ensure that the managed migration process delivers for the most vulnerable.

**Ged Killen** (Rutherglen and Hamilton West) (Lab/Co-op): It is reported in today’s *Daily Record* that South Lanarkshire Council has warned its employees that because they are on four-weekly pay and will get two payments in November, they stand to lose their universal credit over Christmas and will have to reapply. What will the Minister do to fix this shambles?

**Alok Sharma**: I am happy to have a discussion with the hon. Gentleman on the particular case he raises.

**Stuart C. McDonald** (Cumbernauld, Kilsyth and Kirkintilloch East) (SNP): What will the Minister do to address the fact that too many applications for vital alternative payment arrangements are being delayed, ignored or even lost by the DWP, totally undermining their purpose?

**Alok Sharma**: If the hon. Gentleman has individual cases of constituents facing these difficulties, he should bring them to me. I cannot react to general comments, which we hear quite a lot from the Opposition. When Members have specific cases, they should bring them forward and we will deal with them.

**Mr Jim Cunningham** (Coventry South) (Lab): I will be as brief as I can. For all the reasons outlined by my colleagues, the roll-out should be stopped and people should not lose out, especially given that a lot of people have been driven into the hands of money lenders as a result of the roll-out.

**Alok Sharma**: As I have said, we will be bringing forward the managed migration regulations later this year. If the Opposition want to support people and ensure that they are protected, they should vote for those regulations together with us.

**Alison Thewliss** (Glasgow Central) (SNP): Someone making a claim on 5 December, the day that universal credit starts at Shettleston jobcentre—not Bridgeton, as the Minister found out yesterday, because he has already shut that jobcentre—will receive no money until 9 January. Is the Minister happy to be known as the Grinch that stole Glasgow’s Christmas?

**Alok Sharma**: I have never been described as a Grinch before. The hon. Lady ought to be encouraging her constituents—clearly this discussion is had by work coaches when claimants come in—to talk about the advance that is available for people. [Interjection] Well, it is interest-free. Also, as I have said, those on housing benefit get two weeks’ run-on.

**Mr Paul Sweeney** (Glasgow North East) (Lab/Co-op): Some 72% of universal credit sanctions in Scotland hit those aged under 30, one in five of whom are 18 or 19 years old. As full-service universal credit rolls out at Springburn jobcentre in my constituency from 31 October, will the Minister at least suspend all sanctions until after Christmas?

**Alok Sharma**: Sanctions are implemented only once there has been a detailed process, and there is an opportunity for individuals who are facing a potential referral to explain to decision makers why there are mitigating circumstances.

**Stewart Malcolm McDonald** (Glasgow South) (SNP): Universal credit comes to Castlemilk jobcentre in December. The Minister will know that one, because he tried and failed to close it down. Can he guarantee that there will be no more closures or changes to jobcentre provision in the city of Glasgow?

**Alok Sharma**: We have reconfigured the jobcentre estate, as the hon. Gentleman knows. He will also know that part of the reason was that we were paying for 20% of space that we were not using. We now have a jobcentre estate that is fit for the 21st century.

**Martin Whitfield** (East Lothian) (Lab): The Minister has answered a number of questions about double payments in a four-week period. Christmas is coming, and the majority of part-time workers who claim universal credit will be double-paid, so their universal credit will then be affected in the next payment period. These are not individual cases, although they are individual people. This is a system fault and it should be put right for this Christmas.

**Alok Sharma**: As I have said, universal credit adjusts depending on the amount of money that people are earning. In periods when they are not earning a salary, obviously their universal credit payment would go up.

**Brendan O’Hara** (Argyll and Bute) (SNP): Can the Minister assure those in my constituency—a vast area of 7,000 sq km, with 23 islands and only five jobcentres—with limited connectivity that they will not be penalised as they are unable to access their online journals?

**Alok Sharma**: As the hon. Gentleman will know, it is possible to phone jobcentres, and in cases where people are vulnerable, it is also possible for home visits to be made.

**Frank Field**: May I thank you for granting this urgent question, Mr Speaker? Huge numbers of people will know after our proceedings that they have not been deserted by their MPs. Thank you very much.
Mr Speaker: Well, it is a pleasure. My job is simply to facilitate the House in discussing in this place what people are discussing in the Dog and Duck, around the dinner table and in the workplace.

Frank Field: And in the DWP.

Mr Speaker: And in the Department for Work and Pensions, as the right hon. Gentleman pertinently observes. I am very grateful to him for what he has just said.

Jonathan Ashworth (Leicester South) (Lab/Co-op) (Urgent Question): To ask the Secretary of State for Health and Social Care to update the House on clinical waste incineration across the NHS.

The Minister for Health (Stephen Barclay): Yesterday evening, the hon. Gentleman, in a point of order, repeated claims made by Healthcare Environmental Services regarding incineration capacity, and the right hon. Member for Normanton, Pontefract and Castleford (Yvette Cooper) raised a point of order on the capability of Mitie to deliver waste management services for the NHS and on TUPE arrangements for staff employed by Healthcare Environmental Services. I would like to clarify why the statement that there is sufficient incinerator capacity is correct, and why the claims made by the company, which is currently subject to criminal investigation, should not be taken at face value, as appears to have been the case yesterday.

With regard to incinerator capacity, there have been quotes from Environment Agency and NHS Improvement officials, cited in the Health Service Journal in May and August 2018, suggesting that there is a shortage of clinical waste incinerator capacity. By the time of my statement on 9 October, far more due diligence had been conducted on the claims made by Healthcare Environmental Services. Analysis carried out by NHSI identified 2,269 tonnes of incinerator capacity in October. The trusts served by Healthcare Environmental Services produced 595 tonnes. The analysis shows that there is sufficient incinerator capacity for clinical waste and that the statement made to the House was therefore correct. The issue is whether HES is willing to pay for that capacity. The fact that Mitie has secured 1,000 tonnes of incinerator capacity demonstrates that it is available.

The right hon. Member for Normanton, Pontefract and Castleford questioned whether Mitie was capable of delivering waste management for the NHS. The Mitie contract was put in place rapidly on 5 October to ensure continuity of service following trusts exercising their step-in and then termination rights to end their contracts with Healthcare Environmental Services. Over that weekend, Mitie visited the NHS sites to understand their business needs and the frequency of collections required, and responded immediately to trusts where waste needed to be collected. It also located bins on those sites so that the collections could start. Putting a new contract in place so quickly clearly means that there needs to be a phased approach to Mitie providing 100% of the service previously provided by Healthcare Environmental Services.

Mitie is working closely with NHSI to ensure that the needs of the trusts are being met, and regular collection schedules are in place at sufficient levels to maintain all patient services safely. The trusts also have additional contingency storage in place on site, with the waste being collected correctly stored so that the NHS can contain its services. This storage contingency will remain in place until Mitie meets 100% of the waste collection frequency required by the trusts. There is no risk to public safety through the action taken by the trusts.
As regards TUPE, Mitie has written to Healthcare Environmental Services and its legal representatives to request complete information, to assess the situation with regard to the potential transferring of employees and to minimise disruption for those employees. Mitie has also set up a dedicated helpline and email address to support Healthcare Environmental Services staff at this uncertain time.

It continues to be the case that there is no risk to public safety through the action taken by these trusts and that all NHS trusts have been able to continue to provide operations in line with meeting our key objective.

Jonathan Ashworth: All we are asking for from the Minister is full transparency. Last week, he told the House with great confidence that “the suggestion in some quarters that this is an issue of a lack of capacity is simply not valid.”—[Official Report, 9 October 2018; Vol. 647, c. 39.]

Subsequently, we read in the Health Service Journal, as he mentioned, that NHS Improvement had concerns about capacity back in August and acknowledged that there were “national market capacity issues”. He has told us today that due diligence has been done since then. Why did he decide not to reveal in his statement last week that concerns were raised with him back in August? Was he aware when he came to the House and made his statement that these concerns had been raised in August? He tells us that extra due diligence has been carried out. Can he explain what that extra due diligence actually is?

The Minister has tried to reassure us again today that there are no public health implications to the measures that have been put in place since HES lost these contracts. Can he therefore explain his view of the various allegations currently circulating on social media, with photos and videos suggesting that waste is not being picked up from a health centre in Keighley, that hospital staff in Leeds are shifting waste in inappropriate overalls, that hazardous waste at Dewsbury is being stored in inappropriate shipping containers and that up to 15 trusts across Yorkshire are storing waste illegally? Has he checked each and every one of those allegations? Can he tell us what his inquiries have revealed about them? If he has not looked into each and every one of those allegations, why not?

Can the Minister assure us that incineration sites to which tonnes of waste from HES facilities are now taken are big enough to safely manage this waste, that the drivers transporting the waste are suitably qualified and that the incinerators now being used are designed to deal with hazardous waste? Last week, I asked him to give us a cast-iron guarantee that there is no risk to public health at any of those sites, or where the waste is currently being incinerated. Will he give us that absolute guarantee today? All we want from the Minister is complete and utter transparency. We have not had that so far.

Stephen Barclay: The hon. Gentleman’s first concern was that a statement given in October, with up-to-date information based on the work done leading up to it, was in some way incorrect because it did not pick up on early discussions within NHSI, which was only notified on 31 July. Obviously the concerns raised by HES about a lack of incinerator capacity needed to be looked into. Having been looked into, those concerns were found not to have merit. The evidence for that is the fact that the new supplier, Mitie, has been able to secure 1,000 tonnes of incinerator capacity. If the hon. Gentleman’s central charge is correct, he will need to explain how Mitie has been able to find available incineration capacity when HES was unable to do so.

The hon. Gentleman asked when I was notified. I was not notified of the internal discussions among officials in August; I was not dealing with the issue at that point. The issue is what the House was informed of when the statement was made.

On the allegations on social media, I have not checked every single tweet that the hon. Gentleman has looked at, but the fact is that of the 17 trusts, three have had the stock of waste on their sites cleared and 12 are due to have theirs cleared by the end of the week, with two remaining, as Mitie mobilises from around 80% of service delivery now to 100% in the coming weeks.

The right hon. Member for Normanton, Pontefract and Castleford has made some legitimate points about TUPE and about Mitie scaling up, which I am sure she will come on to. Those points were not addressed, surprisingly, in the shadow Secretary of State’s comments, but I am happy to pick them up in due course. One of the advantages of Mitie is that it should deliver greater resilience, because it is not looking to deliver all the elements of the contract in the way that HES is. It is bringing in other firms, such as logistics suppliers and disposal firms, so there will be greater resilience in the contract, but we can address any specific concerns that the right hon. Lady has, given her constituency interest.

Rebecca Pow (Taunton Deane) (Con): I thank the Minister for his clear words. I remember just how emotive the whole issue of incineration can be, because I was a news reporter at the time of the foot and mouth and BSE sagas, and it is something that worries the public. Can I have an assurance from the Minister that there is an industry-wide agreement that there is enough capacity everywhere to deal with incineration?

Stephen Barclay: My hon. Friend is right to identify the concern there has been following comments on social media and certain media reports about incineration and the nature of this clinical waste. As I said in my statement, I am happy to confirm that there is sufficient capacity, as Mitie has demonstrated. It is worth reminding the House that just 1.1% of the waste under discussion is anatomical, and many of the media reports do not reflect that.

Neil Gray (Airdrie and Shotts) (SNP): The business concerned, Healthcare Environmental, is based in Shotts in my constituency. Waste incineration—where and how
it happens—is always an emotive and controversial issue, and it is imperative that we get strong regulation right. But it appears that the UK Government have influenced—shall we say—that regulation to deal with an issue that the company claims was contained and it had a plan to deal with.

Can the Minister confirm whether special dispensation has been granted to a municipal site in Slough that apparently does not have a licence to deal with hazardous waste, to incinerate this waste in a way that would otherwise have been inappropriate? Can he confirm that the waste has been handled by unlicensed individuals and been moved against normal regulations? Can he clarify what role the Cabinet Office has had in this issue and whether the UK Government have had any relationship with Healthcare Environmental’s competitor, Stericycle? The focus last week was on Healthcare Environmental, and now the focus appears to turn to Government actions. With 400 jobs under threat across the UK and 150 in my constituency, is it not time we had an independent inquiry into this whole mess?

Stephen Barclay: The hon. Gentleman is right to recognise that there is a significant impact in Scotland, given the services that HES supplies, and it is worth reminding the House that HES is still trading and clearing waste from a number of NHS sites. However, given that it has been subject to a series of actions by the Environment Agency and is subject to a criminal investigation, it is worth treating HES’s claims with a degree of caution.

The Environment Agency is of course an independent agency, so it is for the Environment Agency to look at how waste is being processed, and a strict legal framework applies to that. The specific concern about Slough has not been raised with me, but I am happy to take that away and write to the hon. Gentleman.

The Cabinet Office has been in active discussion with the NHS and the Department of Health and Social Care, as have Scottish officials, who have worked very constructively with officials in England. This has been seen as an issue that affects Scotland as well as England, and it is one on which officials have worked collaboratively.

Mrs Anne Main (St Albans) (Con): Can my hon. Friend reassure patients who might be concerned that their operations have been delayed in any way, shape or form by this whole fiasco that at no point were any members of the public put at risk by the treatment or non-treatment of this particular sort of clinical waste?

Stephen Barclay: My hon. Friend is absolutely right to focus on that. The key risk in respect of this supplier was that the NHS’s ability to continue to perform operations would be affected if it could not clear its clinical waste. I am happy to reassure her that all 17 trusts affected have been able to maintain their services, which ultimately is the key issue for patients and our constituents.

Yvette Cooper (Normanton, Pontefract and Castleford) (Lab): Can the Minister confirm that the staff are being offered TUPE transfers? I have heard from constituents who have been told that they are not, and clearly it is completely unfair for staff to be stuck in limbo like this. Can he say whether he has considered breaking up the contract and treating incineration separately, what the additional cost of the new contract might be and which part of the NHS is paying?

Stephen Barclay: The right hon. Lady raises an important point. I am happy to meet her to discuss these issues, given her constituency interest. I understand that she met members of staff on Friday. I very much urge HES employees who are listening to the debate to phone Mitie’s dedicated helpline and provide their details. The key issue is that Mitie has requested information from HES that it has not provided. To assess whether TUPE legally applies and the work patterns and issues of the staff involved, Mitie relies on HES providing information that, to date, has not been provided. The key issues in giving reassurance to staff are for them to contact the helpline and for HES to provide the information requested.

Julian Knight (Solihull) (Con): I congratulate the Minister on the measured way in which he is dealing with this unpleasant situation. Can he confirm that the Environment Agency will suspend HES’s remaining permits if enforcement action does not return it to full compliance?

Stephen Barclay: My hon. Friend will be aware that the Environment Agency is an independent body, so it will be for the Environment Agency to reach a decision on whether such a suspension should be raised. I can reassure the House that the issue is subject to great scrutiny at present and that the Environment Agency is looking at it very closely.

Jamie Stone (Caithness, Sutherland and Easter Ross) (LD): It seems to me that there are two ways of looking at such issues. Factoring in numbers, statistics and logic is one way and leads to one conclusion, but when we think about human decency and human dignity it becomes something entirely different. The public’s confidence in the methodology is absolutely paramount at this stage. First, does the Minister recognise that, and secondly, can he tell me what he is doing to restore that public confidence?

Stephen Barclay: The hon. Gentleman is absolutely right, and I very much recognise that. The emotive nature of the topic and the way in which some of the headlines have been written do cause alarm. We are being very strategic. First, we are ensuring that our key priority, which is continuity of service in hospitals, is maintained. Secondly, we are ensuring that a supplier is mobilised as quickly as possible. He will recognise that to mobilise a supplier over so many contracts, where those contracts are not uniform—there are different legal provisions in them—is a complex issue. Thirdly, where there is an interregnum with regard to contingencies and waste that needs to be stored on site, we are ensuring that that is done in the safest way possible and that the waste is then cleared at the earliest opportunity.

Andrew Jones (Harrogate and Knaresborough) (Con): I thank my hon. Friend for the reassurance that there is enough capacity in the incineration system to deal with this issue, but will he confirm that the delays caused by
Healthcare Environmental Services have not had an impact on the capacity for patients to receive the treatment that they need?

Stephen Barclay: My hon. Friend is absolutely right that the issues we have experienced with the supplier have not affected the NHS’s ability to maintain its service. That has been our key objective throughout, and that continues to be the case.

John Howell (Henley) (Con): Will the Minister confirm that, after the NHS trusts had terminated their contracts with HES, a new contract was given almost immediately?

Stephen Barclay: My hon. Friend is absolutely right. One of the key issues was to have alternative provision in place as quickly as possible so that we were not in the situation of waste being stored on site beyond the absolute minimum. It is a tribute to officials in the Department and in the NHS, the Department for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs and elsewhere that a quite complex set of legal arrangements has been mobilised in such a short period to ensure that services are maintained.

Mr Marcus Jones (Nuneaton) (Con): While the backlog is being cleared, will my hon. Friend confirm that any waste will be kept in a secure and safe fashion? Will he also be more exact about when he thinks the backlog of waste currently in the system will be cleared?

Stephen Barclay: There are two different components to that. There is the waste on sites, such as at Normanton, where HES has allowed a degree of waste to be stored, but I think my hon. Friend’s question is driving at the waste on hospital sites. As I said in my statement— [Interruption.] If the hon. Member for Leicester South (Jonathan Ashworth) waits for the reply, he will hear that the stock on those sites is being cleared. Perhaps he has been busy checking social media again. The bulk of the sites will be cleared by the end of the week; there will be two remaining beyond this week. We are very much focusing on that issue.

Mr Philip Hollobone (Kettering) (Con): Will the Minister confirm that, had he not taken action, the failure of Healthcare Environmental Services to dispose of the clinical waste properly would have presented a serious risk of clinical waste backing up in hospitals and other healthcare facilities? Owing to his taking effective action in a timely way, that has been avoided and healthcare delivery has not been interrupted.

Stephen Barclay: I thank my hon. Friend for that question. There has very much been a Government-wide effort to ensure that waste did not build up, for the reason he mentions—the ability of the NHS to maintain its services and continue to operate if clinical waste could not be removed from the site. There is a varying degree of contingency capacity on different sites, so certain hospital sites would quite quickly exhaust that capacity if it was not cleared. That is why, as my hon. Friend the Member for Henley (John Howell) said, the ability to mobilise the contract quickly was so important.

Eddie Hughes (Walsall North) (Con): Will the Minister assure the House that good governance will be in place to ensure that the new provider can dispose of the waste very safely?

Stephen Barclay: I am very happy to give my hon. Friend that assurance. There are lessons to be learned from the HES contract, and I am keen that we do so, but as I commented earlier, the contract with Mitie—through the use of different logistics firms and different waste sites—will actually build greater resilience into the arrangements for clearing clinical waste.

Tom Pursglove (Corby) (Con): Building on that point, will my hon. Friend ensure that there is an overarching review of local processes to make sure that failings of this sort by a contractor cannot happen anywhere in the country?

Stephen Barclay: I am very happy to give my hon. Friend that reassurance. It is important, where a supplier has got into such difficulties, that we learn the lessons and ensure that they are part of contract procurement moving forward.
Bullying and Harassment: Cox Report

Mr Speaker: Before calling the hon. Member for Bassetlaw (John Mann) to ask his urgent question, I wish to make the following brief remarks. Having read with care the report by Dame Laura Cox and having also lived through the MPs’ expenses scandal, I am persuaded by at least two of her fundamental recommendations. Without seeking to pre-empt what the House might ultimately decide, I firmly believe that the only possible way to resolve this matter is the establishment of a body that is both entirely independent of and external to Parliament to hear and adjudicate on all allegations of bullying, harassment and sexual misconduct, including deciding how far to investigate past misconduct. Whether the allegations involve MPs or staff, the same entirely independent body should be in complete control of the process from start to finish. As I have said before in this Chamber and to the Leader of the House’s cross-party inquiry in my oral evidence last December, independence and transparency are the best guarantors of a process that will both be fair and command general confidence.

1.57 pm

John Mann (Bassetlaw) (Lab) (Urgent Question): To ask the Leader of the House to make a statement on “The Bullying and Harassment of House of Commons Staff Independent Inquiry Report”.

The Leader of the House of Commons (Andrea Leadsom): May I thank the hon. Gentleman for his urgent question? I am genuinely pleased to have an opportunity to share some initial views with the House. I welcome Dame Laura Cox’s report, and I want to thank her and, in particular, all those who have come forward to tell their stories to this inquiry. Over the past year, we have all been shocked and appalled at the reports of bullying, harassment and sexual harassment in Westminster, and I am determined to stamp it out. The findings in this report are undeniably worrying, and they reflect poorly on the systems in the House of Commons.

In all the work I have done to create a new, fair and transparent complaints system for Parliament, I have been clear that everyone has the right to be treated with dignity and respect. I am so sorry to hear of the experiences highlighted by Dame Laura’s report of members of Commons staff, and I speak to them directly and often. I have discussed this a number of times, and he is gravely concerned because this is an issue that he has pursued. He and I have discussed this a number of times, and he is gravely concerned.

Last November—almost a year ago—the Prime Minister asked me to convene a cross-party, bicameral working group, including staff members, to develop our independent complaints and grievance policy. The initial scope of the working group was not to include House staff, as it was understood that the policies in place, such as the Respect policy, were sufficient and robust enough to deal with any complaints made by House staff. Subsequent reports came to light through the media, however, that strongly suggested that that was not the case.

As a result, at my instigation, the external members of the House of Commons Commission, without further reference to any elected Member, appointed Dame Laura to conduct a fully independent inquiry into the alleged bullying and harassment of House staff and the effectiveness of policies such as Respect and Valuing Others. Her report is the result of that inquiry. To clarify the current position, the independent complaints and grievance policy has been up and running since July, and all staff have access to it, including House staff and those making historic allegations. We have set up two independent helplines—one to deal with allegations of bullying and one to deal with allegations of sexual misconduct.

The new scheme delivers a behaviour code that applies to everyone who visits or works in Parliament. We have a new HR advice service for MPs’ staff, and House staff have access to an employee assistance programme. We have also implemented a significant new training offer, as well as an induction scheme for staff joining Parliament for the first time. The complaints procedure provides full confidentiality for all complainants, and I am pleased that Dame Laura recognises the importance of this. I have been absolutely clear right from the beginning that this is the start, not the end of the process. The ICGP has reviews built into it at six and 18 months, and Dame Laura’s inquiry report will be central to shaping those views.

Colleagues may be aware that the House of Commons Commission has called an urgent meeting for Monday to consider this report, and as I have said, the House leadership must now respond fully and promptly. It is imperative that we make Parliament a modern, professional and safe place to work—where everybody is treated with dignity and respect.

John Mann: When I raised the expenses scandal 12 months before The Daily Telegraph exposé, it did not go down well in Parliament. With the child abuse inquiry and the Westminster scandal, the ongoing response of the political parties is to put a lawyer and QC into the inquiry to protect the interests of MPs past and present. In the sexual harassment scandal, people have gone public making serious allegations, but they have been left in limbo for more than a year. Now we have this. Paragraph 30 refers to “a culture that is as embedded as it is shocking.”

That sums up the report. Paragraph 141 says that it is well known that there are “serial offenders” currently in Parliament. Paragraph 160 goes through the 15 different forms of harassment and bullying behaviour. Paragraph 161 goes through the impact of that. Paragraph 419 pleads for “the active support” of MPs, which says rather a lot.

Will the Leader of the House guarantee that all three of the simple recommendations made by Dame Laura Cox will be implemented? Further, because I am aware what the problems are, will the Labour party and every other Opposition party guarantee their unequivocal public support today for those three recommendations so that they can be pushed through speedily and effectively?

Andrea Leadsom: I am grateful to the hon. Gentleman because this is an issue that he has pursued. He and I have discussed this a number of times, and he is gravely
concerned about the allegations of bad behaviour that has taken place and a bad culture that has existed in this place for far too long. I pay tribute to him for all the work that he has done in this area.

This is a matter for the House, and as Leader of the House I will do everything in my power to stamp out all forms of bullying and harassment. I would say to all hon. Members—those who attempted to turn a blind eye or allowed it to go on under their view—that as we all know, for evil to succeed good men need only do nothing.

Mrs Maria Miller (Basingstoke) (Con): Dame Laura Cox says in her inquiry report that “many consider that there is still no genuine understanding that things need to change.”

She says that a shocking culture of fear and deference is driven right from the top of the House of Commons—behaviour that we simply would not tolerate elsewhere.

The new grievance procedure is welcome, and my right hon. Friend is to be applauded for what she has done to put that in place, but it is not enough, and Dame Laura says that. She makes it clear that there is a need for a culture change, too, which directly requires a change in the management of the House of Commons.

As we have just heard, very senior management are the people who will decide what happens next as a result of the report. Will the Leader of the House explain how the brave staff who have spoken out can be reassured that action will be taken, because the House of Commons has a duty to lead by example—to be an exemplar employer. The report makes it clear that there needs to be a complete change in leadership at the most senior level, including you, Mr Speaker, as chief officer, if we are, in Dame Laura’s words, to “press the reset button”.

Andrea Leadsom: My right hon. Friend cares a great deal about these issues. Again, she has been closely involved in the progress of the new complaints procedure and has had a hand in shaping its direction. She will know that all those involved in the working and steering groups across the political parties throughout the House worked tirelessly to reach an arrangement in which we would be in a position to change the culture of Parliament. She is exactly right to highlight the fact that that is what is needed. I am sure that the hon. Members for Walsall South (Valerie Vaz), for Brighton, Pavilion (Caroline Lucas), and for Perth and North Perthshire (Pete Wishart), and all those involved in the working group will take the same view as I do that we have to change the culture of this place. It is absolutely vital that we do that. It is not going to happen overnight, and we have to continue to lean in and accept the recommendations in Dame Laura’s report and do everything that we can to ensure that this place mends its ways and becomes not just an exemplar but a role model for other Parliaments around the world so that they can learn from our experiences.

Valerie Vaz (Walsall South) (Lab): I thank the Leader of the House for her response to the urgent question from my hon. Friend the Member for Bassetlaw (John Mann), and you, Mr Speaker, for granting the urgent question. I, too, thank Dame Laura Cox QC OBE for taking the time to work on this important issue and for her comprehensive report. It is never easy for an institution when the spotlight is quite rightly shone in this way. Hon. Members should know—the Leader of the House touched on this—that the terms of reference were drawn up by the non-execs on the Commission, Dame Janet Gaymer and Jane McCall, and hon. Members did not have sight of that, nor did we have sight of the report before it was published.

Two hundred people who are currently working or have previously worked here came forward to speak to Dame Laura Cox, and it must sometimes have been difficult to raise these issues. This 155-page report needs to be looked at carefully. Dame Laura said that this has been “an inquiry, not an investigation.”

At paragraph 23, she said:

“Disputed allegations require due process and a fair hearing for both sides in order to determine the facts”.

She said that she was “not in a position in this inquiry to determine or re-open any individual complaints.”

I was a member of the Governance of the House Committee that was set up to review the structures of the House. Being able to speak to Members of staff at all levels was helpful in determining changes. Like the Leader of the House, I see those changes as an ongoing process. Does the right hon. Lady consider that having an ongoing staff panel with trade union representatives would be helpful?

A process of change has already taken place. In paragraph 63, Dame Laura says that, as Professor Sarah Childs noted in “The Good Parliament” report, which was commissioned by you, Mr Speaker, in 2016, diversity also plays an important role in making Parliament a more diverse place.

Dame Laura did criticise the decision of the working group to implement a new code of conduct without waiting for the outcome of her inquiry. She said that implementing a new code of conduct should not have been rushed and went on to say that “it is more important to get it right than to get it done in haste, in accordance with self-imposed deadlines”.

The independent complaints process is to be reviewed in January 2019. Can the Leader confirm that the Cox report can be fed into that process, and, if so, how? The report states:

“Delivering fundamental and permanent change will require a focus and a genuine commitment on the part of the leadership of the House.”

The Commons Executive Board will meet to review and discuss its contents, and, as the Leader said, a meeting of the House of Commons Commission has also been convened. The Leader also touched on the fact that in some places it is reported that there are only three members of the Commission. In fact, every party has a role to play on the Commission.

Does the right hon. Lady agree that we should look at other organisations for best practice to ensure there is an independent and robust system for dealing with complaints in a timely way, as Dame Laura set out in her introduction? We need to heed Dame Laura’s suggestion that we need to take time to consider this very important report. Her Majesty’s Opposition will continue to work on a cross-party basis to tackle this issue and to ensure new procedures are as robust and effective as possible to protect everyone working in, and visiting, this House.
Andrea Leadsom: I am grateful to the hon. Lady. She was an absolutely core and integral part of the working group, as, likewise, was her hon. Friend the Member for Brent Central (Dawn Butler) on the steering group. They know as well as I do that this was the result of an enormous amount of cross-party collaboration to come up with the right ideas, to hear from all those who work in this place who have had bad experiences and find out what they would like to see changed. We had a trade union representative on the steering group who had very useful input. We have had staff members at all levels. We have always sought to take soundings from right across the House.

I will answer the hon. Lady’s specific questions. On whether we should have an ongoing staff panel, she will know that the review after six months, which will begin in January, will include staff members. Likewise, the review after 12 months will include staff members. It will be for that second review to decide how frequently subsequent reviews should take place. The hon. Lady says that Dame Laura criticised the introduction of the scheme before the publication of her report. She will know that the working group agreed that we would not delay further on the grounds that, as her hon. Friend the Member for Bassetlaw (John Mann) pointed out in his urgent question, people had already waited for almost nine to 12 months before they could come forward. With no clear date for Dame Laura’s report, it was not right to wait still further. Nevertheless, Dame Laura’s report will absolutely be fed in as a key piece of evidence to the review at six months, which, as I say, starts in January.

The hon. Lady asked about whether we will be looking at other organisations. She will know that we did look at other organisations all the way through the process of putting together the complaints procedure, and we will continue to do so.

This is a matter for the House. All hon. Members who have an interest in bringing forward further recommendations and suggestions should be aware that every party has a representative on the working group or the steering group. They should let their views be known so that they can be taken into account to get the best possible arrangements.

James Duddridge (Rochford and Southend East) (Con): This is a disturbing report, which identifies a number of unacceptable behaviours. Page 64 lists some of them: taunting, mocking and mimicking; deliberately belittling in front of other Members; making offensive personal comments about appearance; belittling someone’s junior status; and making lengthy and humiliating tirades of criticism and abuse in front of colleagues. How can we encourage Mr Speaker to stop this behaviour?

Andrea Leadsom: My hon. Friend will know that there are differing views about the implications of Dame Laura’s report. She is essentially urging all hon. Members to allow senior management to consider not only their own views on their own involvement, but what action needs to be taken by senior management to ensure that change is forthcoming.

Pete Wishart (Perth and North Perthshire) (SNP): Thank you, Mr Speaker, for granting this very important urgent question.

Quite simply, Dame Laura’s report should shame and appall all of us who work on the parliamentary estate. It is a devastating litany, with details of bullying, an inbuilt patriarchal culture and almost out of control gender-based power relationships. It is all about this place. Historical patriarchy practically oozes out of the walls. Centuries of deference is a feature of nearly all our political discourse. I support your call, Mr Speaker, for an independent look at this, but we have to build into that a look at the total culture of this place in the way we do our business. The way we do our business could not be more ripe for the issues Dame Laura identifies. As she says, the issues go all the way to the top in the way that this House is managed. We should simply say that we are no longer prepared to put up with that and that it should be addressed effectively.

I served with the Leader of the House on the grievance working party group. I actually believe it is an excellent piece of work. Does she agree, however, that we have to do much more to make it a reality and a feature of this place? Do we need to advertise it more? Do we need to say to people around this estate and House that this is now available to them and that they should come forward and use it? It is an effective behaviour code, which can go some way to guarantee behaviour in this place. We now have two particular routes through which complaints can be raised. We must get this up and running and working properly.

The one thing we did not address was the culture and environment of this place. Does she agree that the six-month review will look at how we do business in this place? It is no longer acceptable. We have to change the way power relationships are built in this House and the way we do our business. The way we address each other makes these types of issues more of a reality. Will she work with all of us in this House to tackle effectively the culture of this place and make it a place where we all do our business here with dignity, respect and equality?

Andrea Leadsom: I am truly grateful to the hon. Gentleman. He really contributed enormously and very collaboratively to the work we did on the complaints procedure. I am glad that he, like me and the hon. Member for Walsall South (Valerie Vaz), is pleased with the work we did.

The hon. Gentleman is absolutely right to point out that there is a long way to go before we can say “Job done.” What we have done is start on a journey. We are by no means at the end of it. What we have done is ensure that people can come forward, with the confidence that their name will not be splashed all over the newspapers, to make a complaint and to get it dealt with seriously and sensitively. Where there is a very serious allegation, they can be supported where necessary—even to go to the criminal justice system. All those features are incredibly important.

All hon. Members will be pleased to know that the complaints system is working well. I have mystery shopped it, if that is the right term, to see how it is operating. It is operating well. It has been going for only three months. In a further three months, there will be the opportunity to review it thoroughly to see what more can be done. I absolutely assure all hon. Members that I will play my part in facilitating that.

Andrew Bridgen (North West Leicestershire) (Con): Given that the current senior management of the House of Commons are so criticised in Dame Laura’s report,
who can be trusted to take ownership of this important issue? How can those deemed to be the problem themselves ever possibly be part of the solution?

Andrea Leadsom: My hon. Friend raises an issue that is incredibly important and at the heart of this. Dame Laura makes some very specific recommendations for senior leadership to consider, but at the same time, she points out her concerns about how that can be facilitated when certain members of the senior leadership are themselves potentially part of the problem. The starting point for that is the urgent House of Commons Commission meeting that will take place on Monday. Commissioners there will want to consider very carefully what can be put in place to ensure that we can look at the recommendations independently and in a way that enables us to report back to the House on actions taken.

Sir Kevin Barron (Rother Valley) (Lab): The report makes it clear that there is a small number of sitting MPs who are reported to engage in bullying and harassment on a regular basis. It is also clear that this is a long-running issue, so does the Leader of the House agree that we should scrap any limits on how far investigations can go back and get on with making this a workplace to be proud of?

Andrea Leadsom: I am glad that the right hon. Gentleman raised that point. He will be aware that when the working group looked at the issue of historical allegations, we were really keen—unanimously—that the new procedure would be able to look at all historical allegations. However, the internal legal advice that we took suggested to us that it would not be possible to create some kind of system that looked back and judged behaviour that happened a long time ago on the basis of something that had just been agreed. We checked that with external counsel, who indeed confirmed that the further back we go, the more problematic it is. I see that, in her report, Dame Laura challenges that advice. I am glad that the right hon. Gentleman raised that point, because it is something that I will be very pleased to add to the list of things for the review that will start in January.

Mrs Anne Main (St Albans) (Con): The old adage is that the fish rots from the head, and the leadership failings that have been highlighted in this report are extremely worrying. I say to my right hon. Friend that important thing is that nobody need fear being able to call to account those who—however senior they are—have failings. If this report has identified senior leadership failings, I consider that the comments from my right hon. Friend the Member for Basingstoke (Mrs Miller) should be taken into account. No one should be involved in this process who has potentially been linked to being part of the problem.

Andrea Leadsom: I take what my hon. Friend says very seriously. In this place, we are all aware that a number of issues are “matters for the House”. That is quite a tricky concept, because nowhere in the workplace are things simply a matter for all those who are involved in that workplace. So we have some unique challenges in trying to deal with Dame Laura’s recommendations, but deal with them we must. As I have said, the starting point will be the House of Commons Commission meeting on Monday, after which we will have a clearer way forward in what is not a matter for me, as Leader of the Commons, but a matter for the House. I, as Leader of the Commons, will make sure that I facilitate whatever the House decides.

Mr Alistair Carmichael (Orkney and Shetland) (LD): There is a great deal in the report that is shocking, but in truth, there is very little that we should really regard as surprising. The Leader of the House is right when she says that culture change will not happen overnight, but we know from our experience of reforming our expenses system—in the most difficult and painful way possible—that we can in fact change the structures and procedures and that, through these structural and procedural changes, we eventually do change the culture. The root cause of both instances is the sense of entitlement that informs so much of what is done in this place. That is what has to change, and it has to change urgently. When the Leader of the House looks towards the Commission meeting next Monday, will she give me an undertaking that she will go to that meeting with a plan and a timeline for the implementation of the three very clear and straightforward proposals, which my party supports and which should be taken forward by the House as a whole?

Andrea Leadsom: First, the right hon. Gentleman is exactly right about the importance of culture change and about how changing the structures and processes, and getting rid of that sense of entitlement will lead to the change we want to see. I just point out to all hon. Members that the complaints procedure has a number of investigations under way already. There will be consequences for those who are found to have behaved inappropriately, whoever they are in this place. There will be consequences, including—whoever they are—the potential for their livelihood to be taken away from them. That was an absolutely core point behind the complaints procedure. None of those things has come to pass as yet, because it is still very early days. It is only once we see those complaints followed through to their logical extent that we will start to see that people find that there are consequences of the way that they indulge their own behaviour. That is when we will start to see the culture change.

In response to the right hon. Gentleman’s specific request for a guarantee from me, what is really important is that the review that will start in January—only a couple of months away now—will take into account very clearly Dame Laura’s recommendations and deal with and address them, because it will be caught up with the overall review of how the complaints procedure is working. The House Commission will absolutely undertake to address and draw some conclusions from Dame Laura’s recommendations, but it will be brought into the review of the entire complaints procedure, where we will actually see actions forthcoming.

Sir Paul Beresford (Mole Valley) (Con): My right hon. Friend will be aware that the independent Parliamentary Commissioner for Standards has the right to initiate inquiries. Does she consider that, in the light of this report, it would be appropriate in some cases for the commissioner to initiate inquiries into some of the historical allegations that have been referred to, perhaps with the assistance and advice of Dame Laura Cox? In the light of that, does my right hon. Friend consider that the Standards Committee should rethink its position on the seven-year rule?
**Andrea Leadsom:** My hon. Friend, as a very experienced member of the House Commission, proposes some very sensible and practical ways forward. I am grateful to him for his suggestions and I think that we should consider them at the House Commission on Monday.

**Chris Bryant (Rhondda) (Lab):** I have twice worked for bullies and it is absolutely miserable: one moment you are being lauded with praise and the next moment, you are being cut down to size. You get shouted at and face all sorts of abuse, but the bully does not think that they are bullying you, because they say that at the end of the week, they are always nice to you and give you praise at some point. But that is part of the bullying pattern. My anxiety in all this is that this is the bit we just ignore. We let the bullies continue in their act of denial. How on earth are we going to change that culture? I have a lot of respect for the work that the Leader of the House has done on this issue, but the report criticises the whole Commission and the House processes. I am not sure that it really can be the Commission who takes the next step forward; I wonder whether she would look at a way of making sure that more Buck Benchers are involved.

**Andrea Leadsom:** The hon. Gentleman describes bullying extremely well and I am sure that that will resonate with all hon. Members. I say again that I have seen far too many instances of people standing by, witnessing such things taking place, and I urge all hon. Members to never let that happen again. As I just tried to explain, it is never easy in this Chamber to explain what “something is a matter for the House” means. I understand his point—we want Back Benchers involved—but I say, as I always do: seriously, my door is always open. I am really keen to hear from people. I could point to lots of hon. Members in the Chamber who have come to talk to me about the process during the complaints procedure. It was an entirely cross-party piece of work. There was an open request for people to come forward with ideas, and that request and invitation remains open. However, in terms of the practicality of how we have a review that starts from nowhere, with a group of Back Benchers, I think that it needs to start with the House Commission discussing how we take this forward, and then the House Commission will potentially need to report back to Back Benchers with some ability for them to feed in their thoughts about whether they agree, or do not agree. I need to think about this process.

I say again that this is not a matter for me as a member of the Government. It is for me as the Leader of the House to work with the other commissioners. It is not for me to overrule them; I am only a member of the Commission. Their views are equal to mine, and between us we need to find a way forward, but I hear what the hon. Gentleman says: it needs to be open to all Members to give feedback and also—this is really important—to others working in this place. It cannot be about only us; it must also be about House staff, Members’ staff and so on. It is a large consultation, and we do not want it to take forever, but I absolutely accept his point.

**Dame Cheryl Gillan (Chesham and Amersham) (Con):** This is a sobering report, and I am pleased that the Leader of the House will take swift action. It is very apposite, too, because today in Geneva, the President of the Parliamentary Assembly of the Council of Europe and the President of the Inter-Parliamentary Union, both of whom happen to be women, have presented a new report on sexism, harassment and violence against women in Parliaments in Europe. Sadly, based on extensive interviews with parliamentarians and parliamentary staff in 45 European countries, we find that this is a common pattern across many Parliaments. Will the Leader of the House undertake to read that report and its recommendations? Perhaps those two important organisations, of which we are proud to be members, might be among those from which she takes advice.

**Andrea Leadsom:** As she often does, my right hon. Friend gives a really good, much-bigger-picture perspective, and she is absolutely right to do so. I have attended a cross-Commonwealth meeting of women politicians to talk about violence against women in politics, and the numbers are shockingly bad. She is absolutely right to highlight that report, and I will of course be delighted to read it. I have already had the pleasure of meeting the Llywydd in Wales and the Presiding Officer in Scotland, both of whom are interested to hear about the progress of our complaints procedure and what lessons they could learn. It was a good opportunity to share ideas.

**Caroline Lucas (Brighton, Pavilion) (Green):** May I suggest that these proceedings are not the time for Members to indulge in a bit of bullying of their own? There should be independent processes, not innuendo.

I warmly welcome the report. The Leader of the House will recall that, as a member of the steering group, I repeatedly argued that we should be able to investigate historical allegations, and the legal advice was clear that bullying and sexual harassment had always been unacceptable. External counsel did not rule that out, and I am delighted that Dame Laura makes the same point, so may we have an explicit guarantee from the Leader of the House that she will personally support the idea that historical allegations, with no endpoint, should be part of our investigation? I take on board what she says about different Commission processes, but people want to know now that she and everyone else understands this and will treat it with the urgency it deserves.

**Andrea Leadsom:** The hon. Lady was fully engaged with the working group and will know that we unanimously wanted to be able to investigate historical allegations. I absolutely undertake that the recommendation from Dame Laura and her challenge to the advice we received will be fully taken into account in the review in January.

**Vicky Ford (Chelmsford) (Con):** As a relatively new Member of the House, may I say that I am enormously proud to serve in it? It is obviously deeply distressing to read the report. Politics, especially British politics at the moment, is a stressful place to be in, and where there is stress, that can enhance bullying and harassment. Will the Leader of the House consider how we can reduce stress levels, especially thinking about last-minute questions and changes to the agenda that put unnecessary stress on politicians and their staff? Can we look at how that is perhaps better dealt with in other Parliaments to find out whether there are ways in which we can try to decrease the stress?
Andrea Leadsom: As my hon. Friend will be aware, a number of new ideas have been presented to Parliament for MPs and their staff—courses on mindfulness, for example—and various all-party groups focus on trying to de-stress this place and make it a little more relaxing and enjoyable, despite the complexities of daily life. She makes a serious point, however, about changes to the environment. On a best-efforts basis, however, we will always try to give the House as much notice as possible and urgent matters arise, I know that it is difficult always to stick to agendas in a changing political environment. On a best-efforts basis, however, we will always try to give the House as much notice as possible.

Jess Phillips (Birmingham, Yardley) (Lab): I feel totally and utterly maddened by this. I am not here to defend anybody—including you, Mr Speaker. I have spoken to hundreds of the people involved throughout this process, and the neither right nor honourable—in my opinion; he probably is not either anyway—Member for Rochford and Southend East (James Duddridge) has probably spoken to none of them. Some of us do not care who is the offender; it is the victims we care about and we will not use this for political gain. Nothing fills the victims with more dread than when people play with their feelings, so I say to him don’t do it—don’t do it for them; you are speaking only for yourself.

I personally think that the management of this place probably needs a massive overhaul, although I will not point the finger for the sake of newspaper headlines. But the fact of the matter is that nothing I have heard today fills me with any hope that politics will be taken for them; you are speaking only for yourself.

Mr Speaker: Before the Leader of the House responds, I want to say one thing. It was important that the hon. Lady was heard fully, but everybody in this place is entitled to her view, about which I have made no complaint, the hon. Lady has put her view, and the Leader of the House will respond.

Andrea Leadsom: I think my response is, “Let’s all take each other with dignity and respect,” but if the hon. Lady knows of 12 people who are walking around abusing people, she should report them. There is now somewhere to report them to, and she should do so.

Sir Desmond Swayne (New Forest West) (Con): I have encountered instances of disgraceful behaviour, and perhaps our constituents could be forgiven for believing that we are constantly going at it with knives, but overwhelmingly hon. Members behave perfectly properly. As for being treated like demigods, I can assure him that I am not either, and I absolutely keep a sense of proportion in all things—that is the only way to survive in this place. He makes a very serious point, however, which is that, as Dame Laura points out, the issue is the few. The vast majority of Members of Parliament, as well as members of House staff and MPs’ staff, are neither victims nor bullies. We should share a common interest in ensuring that we eradicate this entirely from the Houses of Parliament. I say again that my ambition in the time that I hold down this job is to take the journey towards being a role model for all Parliaments around the world. I will do everything I can to see that happen.

Mr Chris Leslie (Nottingham East) (Lab/Co-op): I thank Dame Laura for her important report, in which she emphasises the importance of not just transparency and information—for everyone in the House—but independence. As we have heard, however, if we are to have confidence in that independence, it is not just the operation of the policy but, I am afraid, its formulation that must be independent. The notion of politicians adjudicating upon themselves also comes into the formulation process. If we are to get rid of the perception that individuals are using this process to further their political agendas, it is important that we take senior political figures out of the formulation process. I also agree with those who have questioned the notion of the Commission being the main driving force.

Andrea Leadsom: I hear what the hon. Gentleman says, and I have listened carefully to what has been said by other Members. I will give it serious consideration. The hon. Gentleman, and indeed all Members, will appreciate that there are limited options for kicking the process off if it involves no elected Member—that does make it tricky—but I will give the matter some thought and see what can be done.

Dr Andrew Murrison (South West Wiltshire) (Con): Dame Laura makes it clear that heads must roll, and she identifies some candidates, but can we ensure that this does not become a witch hunt? The House managed the expenses scandal appallingly and needs to take early action in this instance, but can we ensure that appropriate action is taken, including, where necessary, the re-education of Members in how to behave, how to manage staff and how to manage their own anger?

Andrea Leadsom: My hon. Friend is entirely right to say that the training offer needs to be there. We cannot expect people to learn these things through osmosis. Hon. Members have said that we need to do more to communicate with each other about the offer and encourage its take-up. We have a good employer standard, which will be on offer to those who have taken up the training. As we see greater understanding throughout this place—not
only among Members of Parliament, but among chiefs of staff in their offices who may employ interns or junior researchers—it will be important for us to take steps to professionalise the House so that everyone knows what is expected of them.

Kate Green (Stretford and Urmston) (Lab): This is a very shocking report, and the obligation to show leadership in responding to it falls on every single one of us. That leadership obligation is explicit in the standards in public life to which we are all obligated. As others have noted, Dame Laura herself says that it is more important to get processes right than to introduce them “in haste”, and it is a matter of deep concern that in the same paragraph of the report she goes on to say that many now regard our very new processes as already “unlikely to deliver coherence or restore confidence.”

Dame Laura spoke to many people in preparing the report, but has not had an opportunity to speak to the Committee on Standards, and in particular to our lay members, who have also warned that introducing policies in haste would be a mistake and said that her report should have been awaited. May I therefore urge the Leader of the House to ensure that we draw on the reputation, the expertise and the integrity of those independent Standards Committee members, who have a considerable amount to offer?

Andrea Leadsom: The lady may be aware that the working group did actually consult widely and at length with the Standards Committee, and its views were taken very much into account. Significant changes were made to the report as a result of its input, and the review that will start in a couple of months will give it an opportunity to provide further input. At all stages throughout the process of establishing the independent complaints procedure, care was taken to involve all those who work in this place and have a vested interest in upholding good standards in public life. I know that the hon. Lady looks forward to chairing the Committee and I hope that the hon. Lady. That training can take place for those who were already Members, but it will certainly be in place after the next election. As I have said, a good employer standard is available for those who opt to take on training. As it beds in, it will become much more the norm, and I look forward to that.

My hon. Friend also suggests some sort of pledge on how we treat one another. There is already a behaviour code, which can be seen in a number of areas. That will be rolled out still further, including at the entrances to the Palace and Portcullis House, and all the places where members of the public come into this place, as well as bathrooms, restaurants and so on, to make it clear to everyone the code by which we are all expected to abide. Again, that becomes more familiar, it will become much more lived by. It will be something of which people can remind each other, and something that they can think about when they see someone behaving inappropriately.

Mr Ben Bradshaw (Exeter) (Lab): Along with my hon. Friend the Member for Bassetlaw (John Mann), I was one of the first Members to call for independent regulation before the expenses scandal erupted and during it. I think that independent regulation and external adjudication will be the only way forward. I agree with you about that, Mr Speaker.

Is it not clear from some of the contributions that we have heard that some Conservative Members, at least, are motivated by personal animosity towards the current Speaker, who is not in a position to answer back? At a time when our country faces what is probably its most serious constitutional and political crisis for a generation, we need a Speaker who is prepared to stand up for Back Benchers and to stand up for this House against an over-mighty and overbearing Executive, particularly when they are at least threatening to drive through a Brexit that would be completely intolerable to a majority of Members.

Andrea Leadsom: My hon. Friend has made two very good points. Compulsory training for new Members will be introduced after the next election. It was decided that there was no consensus in favour of compulsory training for those who were already Members, but it will certainly be in place after the next election. As I have said, a good employer standard is available for those who opt to take on training. As it beds in, it will become much more the norm, and I look forward to that.

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of the House of Commons, and the independence of independent-minded Back Benchers, that the office of the Speaker is inviolate. That does not mean that he can behave badly or, for instance, do anything criminal, but he should not be the subject of a political campaign, because if that happens, Parliament, and the independence of the House of Commons, will suffer. Will the Leader of the House therefore assure me that when she meets the Commission on Monday, there will be absolutely no pressure on the Speaker from the Executive, and that we will deal with this as an issue, not in terms of personalities?

Andrea Leadsom: The House will have heard what my hon. Friend has to say. As I have said all the way through, what the House Commission will be doing is reviewing the recommendations in Dame Laura’s report and taking action as it sees fit. That is not a matter for me; that will be a matter for the House Commission.

Chris Bryant: They are not available today.

Rachel Maclean: No, they are not.

The point I want to make to the Leader of the House is that this should not just be about avoiding bad and negative behaviour; it should also be about a culture where people can thrive and reach their true potential, as in any other workplace. What are her thoughts on that point?

Andrea Leadsom: My own recipe is that we have cake-eating Thursdays—and homemade cake on occasion, which is a highlight of the week. My hon. Friend makes a really important point. It is vital not only that people are not bullying each other, but that they are treating each other with respect and creating a happy and enjoyable workplace that inspires people and enables them to learn and grow and expand in their own role. I agree with my hon. Friend that it is essential that we take that into account.

Wes Streeting (Ilford North) (Lab): I have never worked in a workplace—in some of them I have been responsible for HR policies and procedures—where there would be open discussion about individual allegations of the type we have seen here. It is so important that we remove individual and specific complaints, which do not appear in the body of this report, from a discussion about the process. Does the Leader of the House agree that we need to make sure, consistent with the point made by the new Chair of the Standards Committee, my hon. Friend the Member for Stretford and Urmston (Kate Green), that all historical allegations can be dealt with under the existing legal framework and principles of accountability in public life, and, secondly, that we bring genuine independence not just when things go badly wrong and people feel compelled to make formal complaints, but so that members of staff, or indeed Members of this House, feel that they can consult HR about having difficult conversations and about raising problems early enough that they never become a source of stress, anxiety or distress?

Andrea Leadsom: The hon. Gentleman makes an important point. In looking at this new complaints procedure, we were seeking to achieve culture change and prevention, so he is right to point out the importance we gave to establishing an HR support service for members’ staff, so that they could find out whether something that was happening was fair, and what they should do about it. The next step would be mediation, to explain to their boss, whether their MP or the chief of staff or whoever, that what was going on was not right—prevention rather than straight to public allegations, when everyone is embarrassed and it is horrible for the victim. The hon. Gentleman is right that there needs to be a step change—victim or complainant-centred, with proportionate measures to try to change behaviour, so that the situation does not immediately become a case of “Right, you’ve complained about me, so either you’re leaving or that’s it,” which was frequently raised with us. I completely agree with the hon. Gentleman’s direction of travel, and it is vital that wherever possible we improve the culture and focus on prevention.

Peter Kyle (Hove) (Lab): People who are subject to harassment in any workplace in any organisation have the right to a rigorous and professional process that treats people with dignity. The same is true for staff of the House of Commons. Here we are also in a public and a partisan workplace. How can the Leader of the House reassure the House that people who experience harassment will not have the public and partisan nature of this place used against them? If they think their allegations will be used against any specific individual or for a political agenda, it will put them off coming forward.

Andrea Leadsom: I am grateful to the hon. Gentleman for raising that point, and I remind all hon. Members that the point about the independent complaints procedure is that individuals can come forward in confidence: their name is kept confidential, as is the name of the person they are making allegations about. Only in the event that the complaint is upheld and it needs to go to the Standards Committee, rather than be dealt with by the Parliamentary Commissioner for Standards herself, could the perpetrator’s name ever come out into the open. That is the whole point of the complaints procedure. From all the evidence that we took from victims, it was clear that they would not come forward, rightly as the hon. Gentleman says, if they were going to be re-victimised by some sort of partisan attack on them or by the media spotlight and so on. So, very importantly, it was at the core of the process that the complainant’s confidentiality should be protected.

Rachel Maclean (Redditch) (Con): Far from expecting my staff to treat me like a demigod, I regard them as absolutely essential; none of us could be MPs without our staff and we could not function in this place at all. They make us look good, frankly—[Interruption.]

Andrea Leadsom: The hon. Member for Gainsborough (Sir Edward Leigh), and row in behind the sentiment of the hon. Member for Rhondda (Chris Bryant), just before he leaves the Chamber. The House of Commons Commission has a bit of a reputation as a sort of hybrid of the Magic Circle and the College of Cardinals. It needs to be able to fish for its members in a wider and deeper pool. It is drawn from too narrow a base of Members of this place and therefore, if it is to command the respect of this place and those who take an interest in its proceedings, that needs to be looked at as a matter of some urgency.
Andrea Leadsom: My hon. Friend makes an interesting point. The complaints procedure that we have established is a means for anybody who works here to make a complaint, but it does not address the specific points in Dame Laura’s review about the structures of the House of Commons. He makes the point that it might be necessary to make further changes to the way in which the House of Commons is managed to improve and support the work of the independent complaints procedure.

Owen Smith (Pontypridd) (Lab): This is a deeply dispiriting report containing some profoundly serious comments. I do not know about other Members, but I was shocked to hear that 200 or more people had come forward to express their concerns. First, will the Leader of the House reassure me that she will not be subjected to any pressure from the people who I fear are exploiting this issue to serve their own personal or political agendas? That might be uncomfortable to say, but it has been evident in the newspapers and here in the House today. Secondly, does she believe that there needs to be a greater measure of independence in whatever way we take forward these processes in future?

Andrea Leadsom: Firstly, I can certainly give the hon. Gentleman the reassurance that I will not be pressured by anyone in any direction. I think that I have evidenced that throughout the work of the working group in setting up the complaints procedure. Secondly, he is exactly right to say that we will need to consider again how the structures in this place work, but as I have said, that is a matter not for me but for the House.

Eddie Hughes (Walsall North) (Con): The report suggests that the health and wellbeing service does not have the recognition that it deserves. It is a valuable resource for all of us on the estate, including those affected by bullying and harassment. Does my right hon. Friend believe that it should be expanded, promoted and properly resourced?

Andrea Leadsom: My hon. Friend is exactly right to suggest that the health and wellbeing work that goes on in this place is excellent, and that it is probably not as widely known about and appreciated as it should be. I will be presenting to a significant group of House staff in the near future about all the measures we have put in place with the complaints procedure in relation to training and support for staff and about the health and wellbeing support that is available. I completely agree that we need to do more to communicate this more widely, and there is a plan for further broad communications over the coming months.

Stephen Doughty (Cardiff South and Penarth) (Lab/Co-op): The allegations in the report are clearly shocking, but as the right hon. Member for Orkney and Shetland (Mr Carmichael) said, they are, sadly, unsurprising. I wholeheartedly agree with the comments made by my hon. Friend the Member for Nottingham East (Mr Leslie) and the hon. Member for Gainsborough (Sir Edward Leigh) about the importance of taking politics out of this process. We cannot have personal agendas being pursued. Does the Leader of the House also agree that it is unhelpful to the victims and to the integrity of all our processes for these matters to be discussed in such ways in the media and for briefings to be given, not least...
because they draw undue attention to certain aspects of these issues while not drawing attention to the many cases that my hon. Friend the Member for Birmingham, Yardley (Jess Phillips) mentioned, which we all know are going on in here and which are not being discussed? Does the Leader of the House agree that having this matter debated through the media is extremely unhelpful?

**Andrea Leadsom:** I gently say to the hon. Gentleman that if he is aware of appalling things going on, he should make the complaints procedure aware of them. He should support people to go to the complaints procedure—[**Interjection.**] He says that he has done that, which I am very pleased to hear. I thank him for that. This should be about making Parliament a place where people can come and work in the knowledge that they will be treated with dignity and respect. This is about making this a better place for all those who have no voice in this Chamber and who do not have the power of a Member of Parliament or a member of the senior House staff. It is for them that we are doing this. We are trying to make this the best place to work, and it is incumbent on all of us to ensure that that happens in everything that we do as individuals. It is also about everything that we walk past. You know, if you are walking past a problem, don't walk past it.

**Mr Philip Hollobone** (Kettering) (Con): May I join those who are expressing concern that the House of Commons Commission is not the appropriate first step for the consideration of this report? My right hon. Friend is the Leader of the House, not just the leader of the Commission, and she has rightly said that this is a matter not for her but for the House. It seems to me to be a sensible first step for her to make Government time available for a debate about, and a vote on, the recommendations in Dame Laura’s report. During that debate, members of the House of Commons Commission could be present to contribute and to gauge the mood of Members. After that debate, there would be a clear set of recommendations decided by Members, which the Commission could then act upon.

**Andrea Leadsom:** My hon. Friend makes a really sensible suggestion, and it is something to be taken into account. He might wish to suggest it to the House of Commons Commission spokesman, the right hon. Member for Carshalton and Wallington (Tom Brake)—I am glad to see him in his place—who will be able to raise the matter on his behalf at the meeting of the House Commission on Monday. In the first instance, however, it would be helpful for the Commission to consider the recommendations and to set a framework for at least a debate in this place.

**Justin Madders** (Ellesmere Port and Neston) (Lab): This report is so stark that we cannot ignore it. Serial offenders and serial predators are still walking around this place with apparent impunity, and we cannot allow that to continue. What kind of message does that send to the victims, and what does it say about our ability to tackle these unacceptable behaviours? I have not seen the legal advice given to the Leader of the House’s group about why historical allegations could not be investigated, but it seems pretty clear from this report that there is no reason why those allegations should not be dealt with. Please may we have confirmation that that will be changed as soon as possible?

**Andrea Leadsom:** The hon. Gentleman sets out very well the fact that we are all appalled by the contents of this report. As I have explained a couple of times, the steering group received advice that it would be problematic to try to measure historical allegations under a behaviour code that had only just been introduced and that to do so could result in a legal challenge that could undermine the whole new complaints procedure. We took external advice, and we were advised that the further back we went, the more problematic this would become. Dame Laura has challenged the advice that we received, and I have already said that we will look at this again as one of the items for review at the six-month review of the complaints procedure, which will take place in January.

**Chris Elmore** (Ogmore) (Lab): The Leader of the House will no doubt be aware that I have spoken publicly about being bullied for seven years as a teenager. I had two nervous breakdowns and one episode of hospitalisation as a result of bullying, so I say without making any kind of partisan point that I find it abhorrent that Conservative Members have used this report to pursue their own agenda and used the issue of bullying to bully the Speaker. As a victim of bullying, I find that appalling, as will all the victims who have come forward to the Leader of the House and to other Members. May I plead with the Leader of the House not to forget our constituency-based staff? There has been a lot of discussion about what happens on the estate and in the House, but can we ensure that, for example, HR staff can visit our constituency offices, just as representatives of the Independent Parliamentary Standards Authority do? There are only 650 of us. We are a small profession in that respect, and I ask the right hon. Lady not to forget those members of staff. She has also talked about putting training for Members on a statutory footing, although there was no consensus on that. I would be her first volunteer to take such training and, frankly, we should all be made to take it.

**Andrea Leadsom:** I pay tribute to the hon. Gentleman, who has spoken out very bravely in the Chamber on a number of occasions about his own experience of being bullied as a teenager. He is absolutely right to raise this issue, which will help other people to feel that they can come forward. He says that he would be the first to take up the offer of training. Perhaps he and I could do the first course together; it would be a great pleasure to do so. He is absolutely right to say that we need to take this incredibly seriously, and I can assure him that we will definitely do that.
Cold Weather Payments

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

3.9 pm

Hywel Williams (Arfon) (PC): I beg to move,

That leave be given to bring in a Bill to require the Secretary of State to report annually on the representativeness in respect of relevant postcode districts of weather stations designated for the purpose of calculating cold weather payments and to conduct a study of alternative methods of calculating cold weather in each postcode district; and for connected purposes.

This Bill seeks to improve cold weather payments to take better account of the location of vulnerable people. Some vulnerable people get a one-off payment of £25 towards their heating during periods of cold weather when the temperature is below 0°C for seven consecutive days, or forecast to be so. Those who qualify are older people, people with a disability and families with young children who are on certain means-tested benefits and who live in particular postcode areas.

However, some vulnerable people are missing out because of how the areas where the weather is sufficiently cold to trigger the payments are defined—that is, by postcode. That is hitting people in upland areas of my Arfon constituency and, I have no doubt, in other upland areas across Wales and England.

Several broad questions about the scheme have always troubled me. Yes, £25 is worth having, but is the payment enough to make a real difference? Must it be paid retroactively? That is a key issue for anyone on a low income who has to buy their energy up front. And why is there a cut-off date of the last day of March? The weather can be very hard in April and even May, particularly in upland areas.

The subject of the Bill is how the Department for Work and Pensions decides whether it has been, or will be, sufficiently cold for a qualifying period in a particular area. I note in passing that cold weather payments were devolved to the Scottish Government by the Scotland Act 2016, and the system is currently being reviewed for improvement. I will look with interest at how the Scottish Government modify decision making to take proper account of their topography.

What is the problem for Wales and England? At present, help is provided to people on two conditions, according to their vulnerability and their postcode. People’s vulnerability is established by the benefits they receive—their vulnerability having already been verified in assessing those benefits—but their inclusion in a particular geographical area is a potential problem, as geographical areas are defined by postcodes, which do not necessarily reflect topography or weather conditions.

My Arfon constituency is a case in point, as it is bundled together with neighbouring Ynys Môn. Arfon includes a fair chunk of mountainous Eryri—Snowdonia, in English—and the clue is in the name. Ynys Môn is the island of Anglesey: flat, coastal, and basking on its western face in the gulf stream as it heads north. Readings for the relevant temperature are taken not in upland areas of around 200 metres above sea level, such as Deiniolen, Rhosgadfan and Mynydd Llandygai, but at Mona on the western side of the island.

In fairness, there is variability in the Arfon constituency itself—constituencies are not a particularly good definer, either. Most people in Arfon live close to the sea, and Arfon means “upon Môn” or “next to the sea.” But for other vulnerable constituents, the payments are a postcode lottery.

I have had invaluable expert advice from Dr Graham Bird of the school of natural science at Bangor University in preparing the Bill. He notes, for example, from data collected at the university’s Henfâs research centre at Abergwyngregyn that the temperature difference between sea level and 200 metres above sea level can vary from 0°C to as much as 4.3°C, with an average of between 1.5° and 2.5°.

There are no long-term weather station records from within Arfon, but records from stations for over 20 years at Capel Curig and Cwmystradllyn, at similar elevations of 200 metres, show winter temperatures 1.6°C to 2°C lower than on Anglesey. Finally, a snapshot over 21 days in October 2017 showed temperatures at Capel Curig up to 3°C lower than at Mona at 1 pm and 2.3°C lower at 7 pm. Dr Bird therefore concludes that “there is a strong argument for saying that the temperature data collected on Anglesey is not particularly representative of upland areas of north Gwynedd or neighbouring west Conwy.”

In response to my Bill, the Department for Work and Pensions has said:

“The scheme links postcodes to the weather stations that provide the most stable and accurate readings for average temperatures.”

I have no doubt that the readings at Mona are stable and accurate, but are they representative of all the postcode areas designated to that station? The Department has also said:

“Each year we review the scheme, seeking expert advice from the Met Office, taking into account representations from MPs and the public.”

My Bill calls for a report on that review that can be discussed publicly. The only reports that we found in researching the Bill were from 1996 and 1997. The 1997 report suggested using individual readings from all 600 postcode areas and incorporating a wind chill factor. Those suggestions were rejected on the grounds of increased complexity. An annual report would allow us all to engage properly in an informed and open debate on the system’s future.

Lastly, my Bill calls for consideration of alternative decision-making systems. I have thought long and hard about this, but I am a layperson. I do not know for certain what those alternative systems might be and how they might work. I will look at any changes in Scotland with interest. I note that, at present, the Department uses information from only about half the 200 available Met Office weather stations. Perhaps using more stations or alternative stations could be debated following the report’s publication.

Cold weather payments have been the subject of debate in Wales and elsewhere over the past few days. I am grateful to the sponsors of my Bill and Dr Bird, and I am grateful for the public support of the older people’s commissioner for Wales, Age Cymru and the Bevan Foundation, and for the support of individual constituents in Arfon and across Wales and England. I am also grateful for the two positive meetings I have had with the Under-Secretary of State for Work and Pensions, the hon. Member for North Swindon (Justin Tomlinson), and for the concern that he and his officials have shown.
I realise that the prospects for change this year are slim, but I trust that the Minister will do all he can and act as soon as possible. Refining the system would not lead to a bonanza for cold, poor, vulnerable people, but the figures from Arfon suggest one or two extra payments per winter, which is worth striving for. There is no time to lose, as the bitter twist to this tale is that each winter there are about 30,000 excess deaths, many of them traceable to poor heating, or even no heating at all.

Question put and agreed to.

Ordered,


Hywel Williams accordingly presented the Bill.

Bill read the First time; to be read a Second time on Friday 23 November, and to be printed (Bill 273).

RATING (PROPERTY IN COMMON OCCUPATION) AND COUNCIL TAX (EMPTY DWELLINGS) BILL (PROGRAMME) (NO.2)

Motion made, and Question put forthwith (Standing Order No.83A (7)).

That the following provisions shall apply to the Rating (Property in Common Occupation) and Council Tax (Empty Dwellings) Bill for the purpose of supplementing the Order of 23 April 2018 (Rating (Property in Common Occupation) and Council Tax (Empty Dwellings) Bill (Programme)):

Consideration of Lords Amendments

(1) Proceedings on consideration of Lords Amendments shall (so far as not previously concluded) be brought to a conclusion one hour after their commencement at today’s sitting.

Subsequent stages

(2) Any further Message from the Lords may be considered forthwith without any Question being put.

(3) The proceedings on any further Message from the Lords shall (so far as not previously concluded) be brought to a conclusion one hour after their commencement.—(Wendy Morton.)

Question agreed to.

3.20 pm

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Housing, Communities and Local Government (Rishi Sunak): I beg to move, That the House agrees with Lords amendment 1. It gives me great pleasure to speak in support of the amendment. As previously discussed in this House, this Bill takes forward two important measures that featured in the Chancellor’s Budget speech of last November. The first fulfils the Government’s promise to end the so-called “staircase tax”, giving welcome relief to businesses. The second, which is the subject of our deliberations today, addresses the issue of long-term empty homes, doubling to 100% the council tax premium that local authorities can charge on homes that have been empty for two years or more.

Neil O’Brien (Harborough) (Con): Is the Minister aware that in my constituency the number of empty properties has been driven down by a third by the existing empty homes premium? I am delighted to see this measure, because it will reduce the number of empty homes in my constituency, which is currently at 400—that represents a village the size of Great Bowden. That means far less pressure on development and a better use of our housing stock.

Rishi Sunak: I thank my hon. Friend for that intervention and for his support for the measures in this Bill. I also pay tribute to his local authority for the sterling work it has clearly done, as have so many others across the country, in tackling this blight of empty homes. I am particularly grateful to him, because I know he has another housing-related debate coming up in short order and so I am privileged that he has made time to speak in support of this measure. I wish him well in his further debate later this afternoon.

Simon Hoare (North Dorset) (Con): My hon. Friend is promoting a very welcome measure. Is he able to give the House any indication of the quantum of properties that lie vacant for more than two years and would therefore accrue this additional council tax? Will he add some indication of the potential uplift in revenue to our local authorities, which certainly need it?
Rishi Sunak: If my hon. Friend will bear with me, I will be grateful for that little bit of patience and I will go over all the facts and figures of the current policy later in my speech. I hope he will find what he is looking for in that section. If he wants to come back to me for more detail at that point, I would very much welcome a further intervention.

Simon Hoare: I am not known for my patience.

Mr Deputy Speaker: You also should not test ours. [Laughter.]

Rishi Sunak: As my hon. Friend mentioned, this measure will strengthen the incentive for owners to bring long-term empty properties back into use. Hon. Members will recall that this Bill received widespread support when it was considered by the House earlier this year. I am very pleased to say that that cross-party support continued through the debates in the other place.

Before we turn to the detail of the amendment, I thought it would be helpful to recap the purpose of this clause and the background to the policy in general. Our housing market is not working as we would want. Young people are often struggling to get on to the property ladder—struggling to enjoy the same opportunities as their parents and grandparents.

Rachel Maclean (Redditch) (Con): I absolutely support the measures the Minister is putting forward. Does he agree that in a town such as Redditch, which is growing rapidly, we need more housing? We struggle to expand, however, because we just have not got the room. It is therefore right that we are bringing more empty homes back into use to meet the housing need of our young people in our growing town.

Rishi Sunak: I thank my hon. Friend for her intervention. She is absolutely right to say that the Government are doing many things to increase the supply of new housing, and I will come on to discuss those, but that we must also do better with the housing we already have. That is what this measure will enable us to do.

Today, the average house price in England is almost eight times the average income, whereas it was four times the average income in 1999. Costs are also rising for private renters, who spend, on average, more than a third of their household income on rent. The Government are committed to boosting housing supply to ensure that hard-working people have a secure place to call home. The Government and the tireless new Housing Minister, my hon. Friend the Member for North West Hampshire (Kit Malthouse), are taking end-to-end action across the entire housing system to address these issues, releasing more land for homes where people want to live, and building them faster and cheaper.

David Linden (Glasgow East) (SNP): The UK is going through a housing crisis. Does the Minister accept that one of the best ways of tackling the social housing crisis is to abolish the right to buy?

Rishi Sunak: The right to buy has helped thousands of young people, first-time buyers, up and down this country to get on to the housing ladder. I have seen the measure transform people’s lives in my constituency, as I am sure many Members have in theirs. It supports what this Government and the Conservative party stand for—allowing people to fulfil their dream of owning their own home.

Eddie Hughes (Walsall North) (Con): Obviously, Mr Deputy Speaker, I am concerned about your latitude in allowing us to venture slightly off the topic—

Mr Deputy Speaker: Or not.

Eddie Hughes: Indeed, but I could not stay in my seat having heard that. Just this summer, the Government announced voluntary right to buy across the west midlands, which is a valuable opportunity and has been heavily subscribed. Members of the public in those homes clearly think it is a good idea.

Rishi Sunak: As always, my hon. Friend puts it well. He has the pulse of the people in his constituency; he knows what they want. We serve to fulfil their aspirations, and I am delighted that the interest in the new scheme has been so high. I look forward to seeing the fruits of that and welcoming all those new people into homes that they will own for the first time.

This set of reforms is putting us on track to see an average of 300,000 homes delivered per year by the mid-2020s, and we are making strong progress. Last year, 217,000 new homes were delivered in England, which is the highest number seen in all but one of the past 30 years. In 2017, the number of first-time buyers stood at about 365,000, which is the highest level in more than a decade.

Building new homes is undoubtedly a fundamental part of improving our housing market, but, as we heard from my hon. Friend the Member for Redditch (Rachel Maclean), we must also make more efficient use of our existing housing stock.

3.30 pm

Layla Moran (Oxford West and Abingdon) (LD): Does the Minister agree that in addition to all the measures in the Bill, the Government must get their own house in order? Some 10,000 Ministry of Defence homes are left empty; does he not think it is slightly ironic that we are discussing this issue when the Government have so many homes that are not being put to use?

Rishi Sunak: I am not aware of the precise statistics for the Ministry of Defence, but in general we encourage all organisations and private owners to bring empty homes back into use. The Bill will apply to all homes. As far as I am aware, there is no statutory exemption for MOD housing, but I am happy to look into that and write back to the hon. Lady. As an MP who represents a constituency with a heavy military presence, with Catterick garrison on my patch, I know well the issues relating to serving personnel and their families having access to good-quality accommodation. I hope that there are few empty homes in my area and that they are all being well utilised. I thank the hon. Lady for bringing that issue to my attention.

It cannot be right that while many households are waiting to find a house to call home, thousands of properties stand empty, some for many years. Beyond
that, homes left empty for the long term can often be a blight on a neighbourhood, as well as sites of crime and antisocial behaviour. I am pleased to say that the Government’s record in this policy area is strong. We have ensured that local authorities have powers and strong incentives to bring empty homes back into use.

Graham P. Jones (Hyndburn) (Lab): The Minister says that he is empowering local authorities, but the Government refuse to have a register of landlords. An enormous amount of paperwork is required for local authorities to chase landlords and get these backyards into use, or whatever the problem is that he says his Government are happy to see resolved. Will the Government help local authorities, as he suggests, and introduce a national register of landlords so that we can take the action that he describes?

Rishi Sunak: I will be careful not to stray too far from my brief, but the Under-Secretary of State for Housing, Communities and Local Government, my hon. Friend the Member for South Derbyshire (Mrs Wheeler), who has responsibility for housing and homelessness, is actively looking into appropriate regulation in the private rented sector and the potential introduction of a single housing ombudsman, among other things. I should point out that the Government introduced measures to tackle rogue landlords and, indeed, created a rogue landlord database and a new set of penalties to tackle the issue. I hope that the hon. Gentleman finds some comfort in that and will wait for my colleague’s findings on the general regulation of the private rented sector.

Before 2013, councils could not collect any council tax from properties that were empty for up to six months, so the coalition Government at the time decided to support councils and ensure that they had the freedom, should they want it, to charge the full rate of council tax on such properties. That same year, the Government enabled local authorities to charge a council tax premium of up to 50% on long-term empty homes.

Alex Burghart (Brentwood and Ongar) (Con): I strongly welcome the Minister’s comments. There are a number of empty properties in my constituency that I would very much like to see come back on the market. Will the Minister tell us what effect the Government’s action has had in this policy area? By what proportion has the number of empty homes come down since the Government made those changes?

Rishi Sunak: I am pleased to tell my hon. Friend that the powers that were introduced in 2013 have been taken up by around 90% of all local authorities, all but three of which applied the full 50% rate. I am glad to tell him that the number of long-term empty properties subject to a premium has fallen by 9% among those councils that have used the power every year since 2013.

There are carrots as well as sticks. Our new homes bonus scheme gives local authorities the same financial reward for bringing an empty home back into use as for building a new home. We have allocated £7 billion in new rent’s record bonus payments to local authorities since 2011. Following those interventions, the number of properties that are empty for six months or longer is down by a third since 2010, from 300,000 to just over 200,000.

It is worth touching on one or two local authorities that have done a particularly impressive job of tackling the scourge of long-term empty properties in their areas. Several years ago, Bolton had close to 3,000 empty properties, but now has fewer than half that number. Bolton Council offered interest-free loans to bring a long-term empty property up to a suitable standard for rental. The council has also introduced an online matchmaker scheme that matches empty-home owners with potential buyers and offers advice about how to rent out properties through the Bolton landlord accreditation scheme. Between March and October of last year alone, more than 300 long-term empty properties were brought back into use. The council has recently joined forces with Bolton College and the University of Bolton on a new pilot project to bring a rundown empty house back into use.

Kent is another example of a local authority on the cutting edge of tackling this issue. Several years ago, Kent County Council launched the “No Use Empty” programme to bring empty homes back into use. Loans available through the scheme are repayable over five years and then recycled for further use. The scheme has now administered loans totalling almost £20 million, unlocking investment from owners totalling a further £20 million, and has returned over 5,000 empty homes back into use over the past decade. Notably, the programme ran a £3 million project to deliver new homes on the site of a former pub in Herne Bay that had been empty for five years following a fire. The pub’s conversion was undertaken in partnership with a local developer, which bought the property and applied for a loan from the “No Use Empty” fund to unlock the redevelopment. The project has now delivered 14 new apartments.

Rachel Maclean: I am delighted to hear of the good work that is going on in Bolton and Kent, but I am obviously much more interested in what is going on in Worcestershire and in my local area. Will the Minister go on to discuss how my council can learn from the excellent examples that he describes?

Rishi Sunak: I am always willing to learn from and listen to local authorities up and down the country. My hon. Friend and I have corresponded on various issues that have been brought to my attention in Worcestershire, and it will always be a pleasure to meet her local authority. She could bring officials here or I could go and visit them.

Sir Roger Gale (North Thanet) (Con): As my hon. Friend has been kind enough to pay tribute to the development in Herne Bay, which is part of the magnificent constituency that I represent, perhaps he would like to come and see the finished development for himself.

Rishi Sunak: I can see my diary filling up rapidly as the debate progresses, but I would be delighted to visit my hon. Friend and the successful redevelopment. Indeed, I will perhaps mention it to my hon. Friend the Housing Minister for when he is next in the area.

Neil O’Brien: I promise not to invite the Minister to my constituency — although I stress that he is always very welcome there. He tempted me to intervene with his mention of the pub that was brought back into use through the “No Use Empty” programme. Does he
[Neil O’Brien]

agree that this legislation is an example of a wider point that needs to be discussed: the reuse of our existing building stock more generally? Permitted development rights and other things that make it easier to reuse older buildings have taken the share of new properties coming on to the market through change of use from about 12% of supply to 20% of supply over the past couple of years. Does he agree that that is saving a huge amount of countryside?

Rishi Sunak: As ever, my hon. Friend makes an insightful point. He has great experience in this area. Indeed, he has published proposals relating specifically to this area, on which my hon. Friend the Housing Minister is engaging with him. More intelligent use of development rights and our existing stock can help play a part in solving the housing market problems that we see.

Graham P. Jones: I am interested in what the Minister says, and do not disagree with it, but I will say the same thing that I said when this legislation came around last time. It is great to talk about Bolton, a unitary authority, and Kent may have a progressive county council—I do not know—but my local district, Accrington District Council, only receives 15% of the precept with 72% going to the shire authority which, unlike Bolton, is not interested in reinvesting. When will we have a change in the law that allows district authorities to retain 100% of the extra precept on the council tax?

Rishi Sunak: Opening up a conversation about the redistribution of council tax is probably beyond the scope of this measure, but we encourage co-operation between local authorities, and there are good examples of that from across the country. Indeed, business rates retention is now working deliberately to incentivise local authorities across tiers to partner together, and we have found that that has unlocked conversations beyond the pooling of business rates to strategic co-operation on other matters, such as housing.

Graham P. Jones: Will the Minister come to Lancashire to encourage Lancashire County Council to give money back to Hyndburn and Chorley?

Rishi Sunak: I am always happy to visit all local authorities, and many of the authorities in Lancashire have submitted proposals to be in the upcoming 75% business rates retention pilots. I am pleased to see lots of local authorities in Lancashire working together, and I look forward to reading that application with interest in the light of those comments.

As we have seen, different areas, from Redditch to Lancashire, will have different housing needs and different numbers of long-term-empty homes, so it is absolutely right that decisions on whether to apply a premium, and the exact rate to charge, should be taken at local level, as they were before. Councils are acutely aware of the needs and demands of their areas. We recognise that local authorities will want to reflect carefully on the local housing market when deciding whether to issue a determination—for example, where a homeowner is struggling to rent or sell a property in a challenging market. We are clear that the premium should not be used to penalise owners of homes that are genuinely on the market for rent or sale.

Kevin Hollinrake (Thirsk and Malton) (Con): I draw the House’s attention to my entry in the Register of Members’ Financial Interests. I also put on the record my support for these proposals. At a time of housing crisis, it is incredibly important that we bring more homes back into use, which is exactly what this measure will do. Will the Minister set out measures for similar situations in which retail premises are unused? Filey, in my constituency, has a shop—I am sorry, Mr Deputy Speaker; I am about to conclude—that has been disused for some time and is a blight on its street. What can the local authority do about that?

Rishi Sunak: It is always a pleasure to take an intervention from my constituency neighbour, who represents what is without doubt the second most beautiful part of the country. I must admit that I am not familiar with that particular shop in Filey, but I will be delighted to chat with my hon. Friend afterwards, to make sure that the full resources of the Department can supply him with as many options as he can supply to the local authority in question.

Eddie Hughes: Does my hon. Friend have any thoughts on empty dwelling management orders, which councils can use to take possession of a property that has been left vacant for six months or more? I understand that those are rarely used by councils in England.

Rishi Sunak: My hon. Friend is absolutely right that empty dwelling management orders exist as a tool for councils to take control of long-term empty properties that cause a social nuisance. I do not have the exact figures to hand, but he is right that those orders are not extensively used. However, they are a measure that local authorities should be aware of. The orders are a tool at local authorities’ disposal and are one of the various measures that they can use to tackle this particular problem. I thank him for raising that option here today.

Bob Blackman (Harrow East) (Con): Does the Minister agree that it is vital that landlords bring properties back into use? They should not be penalised while carrying out genuine work to bring those properties back into use, but equally they should not take an extended period and say that they are doing work when no work is actually going on.

Rishi Sunak: I thank my hon. Friend not only for his intervention but for all his work on the Bill, as both an individual and in his role on the Housing, Communities and Local Government Committee. I am grateful for all his comments as we debated the Bill during its earlier stages. He is absolutely right, and the Government published guidance to that end in 2013—when the original premium was introduced—reminding local authorities to take into account the specific reasons for a property being empty. Hon. Members may wish to note that the provision we are discussing will not bring any additional properties within the scope of the premium; only properties that would already have been potentially liable might be affected by the higher premium.
On the flexibility and discretion raised by my hon. Friend, no property covered by an existing statutory council tax exemption can be liable for the empty homes premium. For example, exemptions are already in place for homes that are empty owing to the council tax payer living in armed forces accommodation for job-related purposes, or for annexes that are used as part of a main property. Furthermore, the council tax system already provides specific statutory exemptions for properties left empty for a specific purpose, such as when a person goes into care. On probate, such properties, where left empty, are exempt from council tax for up to six months after the granting of probate or after letters of administration have been signed.

I also say to my hon. Friend that section 13A of the Local Government Finance Act 1992 gives billing authorities a wide power to reduce the council tax that a person or group of people is liable to pay. That can be reduced to such an extent as the billing authority sees fit. The power can be applied to situations pertaining to the status of a dwelling or the category of a person, and can be used in cases of hardship, fire or flooding. Together with the guidance that I will speak about more broadly in a moment, I hope that this reassures all hon. Members that councils and local authorities will have the flexibility and discretion that they need to treat each situation on a case-by-case basis.

Before I turn to the Lords amendment, I will recap some of the statistics on the operation of the current policy to ensure that everyone has the facts to hand as we reach our deliberations. As I said earlier, 90% of billing authorities have applied the empty homes premium, to around 61,000 homes—that we have data for—in the last year. All but three of those councils did so using the maximum 50% rate. Of the remaining 10% of councils that were not applying the premium, more and more are now starting to. We estimate that the empty homes premium generated around £40 million in the last year for local authorities, when we take into account individual local authority collection rates.

3.45 pm

Alex Burghart: I sorry to ask the Minister this question; it is ignorance on my part. How do councils ascertain that properties are empty? Might we need to give councils additional powers so that they can identify which properties are truly empty?

Rishi Sunak: That is a very thoughtful question. Every council takes a slightly different approach. An interesting method is to offer a temporary discount on empty homes for a short period of time, providing a financial incentive for homeowners to register their home as empty. Down the line, the council then has a list of properties that might become long-term empty. Of course, councils also require people to fill out forms, and there are civil and criminal penalties for filling them out with false or misleading information. Indeed, the authority also has other intelligence from the various other ways in which it touches an individual property. Together, councils can build up a picture of which homes are long-term empty, and apply the appropriate premium as and when necessary.

Hon. Members may be interested to know that the proportion of dwelling stock across the country that has been empty for six months or longer is about 0.85%, with the lowest numbers being found in London and the south-east, and the highest being found in the north-east and the north-west.

Rachel Maclean: I thank the Minister for giving way again. One issue that has been brought to my attention as a local MP is the time that it can take the council to turn around the voids when one tenant leaves and another comes on stream. Will this provision affect the council’s housing stock? I would be grateful for that clarification.

Rishi Sunak: My hon. Friend raises a good point. Council housing is governed by a slightly different set of regulations, so it will not be affected by this particular measure. However, in general she is right to highlight that all local and public authorities have a duty to bring empty homes back into use as quickly as possible for the benefit of all potential residents.

I now turn to the Lords amendment, which makes a helpful improvement to the Bill. I am grateful to the noble Lady Pinnock, the noble Lord Shipley and the noble Lord Kennedy, who originally tabled this amendment in a cross-party spirit. I also thank the noble lords and ladies in the other place for all their contributions on the Bill. Having attended the debates and read through the Committee transcripts, I am grateful for the valuable experience and insight that all those who commented on the Bill brought to bear, as this has helped to inform how we have thought about the legislation. I am glad that there was wide cross-party support in the other place for this Bill and this measure in particular.

This so-called escalator amendment will allow local authorities to charge premiums of up to 200% on homes empty for at least five years and less than 10 years, and to charge premiums of up to 300% on homes empty for at least 10 years. I am sure that hon. Members will agree that it is in keeping with this legislation. It seems crazy that in this day and age, when we have people who are desperate for a home, there might be up to 11,000 properties in England that have been vacant for over 10 years.

Eddie Hughes: I completely agree that it is in keeping with this legislation. It seems crazy that in this day and age, when we have people who are desperate for a home, there might be up to 11,000 properties in England that have been vacant for over 10 years.

Rishi Sunak rose—

Mr Deputy Speaker (Sir Lindsay Hoyle): Order. The Minister has now taken up 50% of the time. It is only an hour’s debate, so I am concerned. We have a lot of Members in the Chamber, and I hope that he is not trying to take up all the time.

Rishi Sunak: Thank you, Mr Deputy Speaker. I have tried to take any interventions that have come my way from all parts of the House, but I will take your steer and try to reach my conclusion in a slightly more swift fashion, if that will help.

I am sure, as I said, that hon. Members will agree that this amendment is in keeping with the spirit of the legislation and will enable local authorities to do more. However, we are not proposing to alter the provision on homes empty for at least two years and less than five years, as we have discussed previously.
Layla Moran: I thank the Minister for paying tribute to my colleagues in the House of Lords who led on this amendment. Does he agree that another issue is land banking? It is all very well if homes are being brought back into use, but we also have an issue of land that is often kept for a very long time. What does he intend to do about that?

Rishi Sunak: I agree that land banking should be looked into. The hon. Lady will be aware that my hon. Friend the Member for North Dorset (Simon Hoare) is currently looking at that issue. Interim findings have been published and more findings will be coming out shortly. I hope that she will be happy to wait for the findings of those reports.

Nor are we proposing to change any other arrangements for charging premiums. It will rightly remain a matter for local authorities individually to decide whether and what premium to charge. In making these decisions, local authorities should of course consider local circumstances, as we have discussed, as well as the guidance issued by the Government.

It is right that we target particularly the homes that are empty for excessively long periods in this way. To be sure, they are likely to be few in number—potentially 11,000, as we heard from my hon. Friend the Member for Walsall North (Eddie Hughes)—but where they exist, they can indeed be a nuisance and a blight on their community. Such properties may even become sites of crime and antisocial behaviour. It is right that local authorities are equipped with greater powers in these difficult cases, where a 100% premium may be ineffective.

We are proposing that these higher premiums come into effect slightly later than the original measure, which was announced at last year’s autumn Budget. This will give homeowners sufficient notice of the change. The 200% premiums will come into effect from 1 April 2020, and the 300% premiums a year later. The original proposal, of which people have had good notice, will come into effect from 1 April 2019, as planned.

We recognise the crucial importance of ensuring that premiums are applied fairly. That is why in 2013 the Government published guidance reminding local authorities to take into account the specific reasons a local property is empty, as indeed we heard from my hon. Friend the Member for Harrow East (Bob Blackman). In the light of this amendment, I can confirm that the Government will take a fresh look at the guidance with the aim of publishing revised guidance ahead of the introduction of the 200% and 300% premiums. This refreshed guidance will be subject to consultation, of course, and we will welcome the opportunity to benefit from the experience of local authorities, council tax payers and others when the time comes. In particular, we are keen to ensure that the guidance clarifies that premiums must be applied with due consideration to issues facing low-demand areas and cases of hardship. We expect to revisit the wording of the guidance to set out clearly the Government’s expectation that premiums are not applied where homeowners can demonstrate that their properties are genuinely on the market for rent or sale and appropriately priced.

Another area we expect to consider is cases where homeowners, as my hon. Friend the Member for Harrow East noted, are struggling to complete or afford renovations that are necessary before the property can be occupied or sold on and where they can demonstrate progress and hardship.

I am delighted to bring forward this amendment, which has been termed the escalator amendment. I am grateful to all colleagues, the Select Committee and partners in the rating agencies for helping to get this amendment and this Bill to the House. By strengthening the incentive for owners of long-term empty properties to bring them back into use, this amendment will surely come as good news for local government, for families seeking a place to live and for the affected local communities as a whole. I commend it to the House.

Jim McMahon (Oldham West and Royton) (Lab/Co-op): It takes a very good education to be able to talk at length without saying much at all.

We are at the end of a process as we reflect on the Lords amendment, which I should say is entirely in line with Labour’s manifesto. If anything, it could have gone much further. While the Lords have suggested a 10-year period regarding the charge on empty properties, the Labour manifesto proposed that after a year, because we recognise not only that there are lots of people on the housing waiting list and many people who are homeless—sofa-surfing and on the streets—but that these properties are often a blight on their local communities. It is right that the owners of the properties are held to account, and a charge is one way of doing so. Of course we welcome the amendment, but we would have liked it to go much further.

We have heard in Committee and in the Chamber that the staircase tax was about listening to the interests of business and how the business rates system was adversely affecting them, but it is slightly odd that of all the issues that businesses are raising when it comes to business rates, this is the sole one that has been picked out for this place to address. There is absolutely nothing about the condition of our high streets and town centres, and nothing about business rates’ impact on our pubs. There is no recognition that while we have rural rate relief for the last pub in a village, council estates are not given the same luxury for the last pub on the estate. Businesses are raising plenty of important issues.

Fundamentally, we see with rates the same thing that we are seeing with council tax: we are incrementally putting more and more pressure on what is a diminishing resource in many places. We have seen that with the revaluation, where the value shifted to London and the south-east, and certainly a way from my region. The Conservative party has been in power for 10 years, through the coalition and more recently with the support of the Democratic Unionist party, and the housing shame in this country is a national scandal.

Kevin Hollinrake: The hon. Gentleman says that the Government are doing nothing to tackle some of the issues on the high street. Is he not aware of the Government inquiry that is led by Sir John Timpson on the difficulties the high street is facing and what we should do about it? Is it not a sensible starting point that we gather some evidence before we decide what we should do?

Jim McMahon: If all we had was time, we could carry out an inquiry and a review every few months, but the fact is that that leads to almost no change. Our tax base
system is getting to a point where it will not be fit for purpose. How can we have a situation where someone’s ability to get adult social care in later life will be predicated on their local authority’s ability to raise money from a diminishing base of council tax and business rates, thereby putting more and more pressure on the communities that can least afford it? How can it be right that a child’s ability to get the protection they need will be based on house values in 1991 when the Government walk off the pitch and end revenue support grant completely? How can that be fair?

Kevin Hollinrake: The hon. Gentleman is being generous in giving way. Will he set out his party’s policies on rejuvenating the high street and replacing business rates?

Mr Deputy Speaker (Sir Lindsay Hoyle): Order. The debate is not about business rates.

Kevin Hollinrake: The hon. Gentleman raised it.

Mr Deputy Speaker: I know. I have allowed Members to generalise. I do not want to narrow down what the shadow Minister has to say. I allowed the Minister to generalise. I do not want to narrow down what the Bill and the Lords amendment.

Jim McMahon: Thank you, Mr Deputy Speaker. I will not abuse the purpose of the debate; I will stick to the Bill and the Lords amendment.

Many of these issues on council tax and business rates need not be party political. Most people recognise that high streets and town centres are at a point where they cannot take much more pressure. Most people recognise that council tax is taking on a disproportionate burden to fund local public services and, increasingly, people services, too. These are not party political points; they are self-evident when we see the condition of council budgets, and our town and city centres and high streets.

I have offered from this Dispatch Box to sit down with the Minister and work out where there is common ground and where we ought to be working together. I am afraid that all these offers of visits to constituencies around the country are taking away time that could be spent in this place working through some of these complex issues, in which have been ignored for so long.

Clearly, we are not going to oppose the Bill, in which very sensible steps are being taken. We support the Lords amendment, so we do not suggest opposing that either. However, we do want a bit more courage from the Department. There is a brand-new Secretary of State in place, who I hope has more access to the door of No. 11 than previously and can finally get a conversation about how we can properly fund local government services. We ought to be working together to find a long-term, sustainable solution to ensure that every man, woman and child right across the country gets the public services they need and deserve.

4 pm

Simon Hoare: It is a great pleasure to follow the hon. Member for Oldham West and Royton (Jim McMahon). I draw the House’s attention to my interest, which I think is in my entry in the Register of Members’ Financial Interests, as a vice-president of the Local Government Association. The hon. Gentleman and I served—I will not say with distinction, but we certainly served—on the Local Government Association resources panel for some years.

All Members will recognise that, as a result of our perfectly properly facing up to trying to repair the disastrous legacy that the Government inherited in 2010, the local government family has certainly faced a disproportionately heavy share of the burden. As we know, that has had an impact on our communities up and down the country. In my judgment, local authorities have acted perfectly properly. I served for 12 years as a district councillor, for seven of which I was running resources and the budget, and my then finance director, Frank Wilson, and I were always at great pains to find any way whatsoever to bring in extra money. We went down the back of every sofa, armchair and chaise longue to find coinage wherever it could possibly be hiding. When the Government presented us with an opportunity to raise perhaps a couple of extra quid, we grasped it like drowning men in a turbulent ocean.

I was interested to hear what my hon. Friend the Minister said about flexibility, which is of absolute importance. My understanding of both the Bill and indeed the Lords amendment is that this should not be viewed not as a revenue raiser for local authorities, but rather a spur to maximise housing stock accessibility. There cannot be a colleague in the House who does not meet people—at their advice surgeries or at other constituency engagements—raising the problems of accessibility to housing, the inability to get on to the housing ladder and the length of and delays in the planning process, all of which make a contribution to the difficulty of getting on to the housing ladder itself. Anything that can be done to increase access to existing housing stock has, in my judgment, to be welcomed very warmly.

If I may, I want to probe what the Minister said and to read into the record his very important comments about flexibility. Proposed new subsection (1A) in Lords amendment 1 reads:

“In subsection (1)(b)—

if anybody wants to buy shares in the man who makes the keys for the bracket signs, I suggest they do so now, because there are an awful lot of brackets in this measure—

“(maximum percentage by which council tax may be increased)”. The key word there is the conditional “may”. It does not have to be increased, and local authorities should view this as not merely a cash cow but, as I say, as a spur to increase accessibility. I hope that my hon. Friend will consider providing very clear guidance to local authorities—perhaps via the Local Government Association—but also directly to finance directors and leaders of councils—that they do have such flexibility.

My hon. Friend the Minister suggested one or two things. I am concerned about cases in which the clock is not reset when a property is sold. I appreciate entirely that there may be circumstances in which there is a paper transaction between brother and brother, or sister and sister, to try to dodge the additional tax, but I suggest that that is probably, given stamp duty and so on, a rather unlikely scenario.

Mark Tami (Alyn and Deeside) (Lab): I understand what the hon. Gentleman says, but does he not accept that there are cases in which people do not have any
intention of selling the property? It might be on the market at inflated price, but if not, when someone tries to buy it, every obstacle is put in their way to stop the purchase.

Simon Hoare: I entirely agree with the hon. Gentleman, which is why I am rather pleased that the Minister may be writing guidance and setting out examples. The hon. Gentleman is entirely correct: whenever we create a system, someone somewhere will find a way of playing it. However, with the greatest respect, I do not think that should preclude the authoring of guidance notes with examples and, indeed, the creation of those systems. However, he is right that we should always be alert to those who try to play the system.

I would like to give the House and my hon. Friend, a fellow Home Office Parliamentary Private Secretary.

Rachel Maclean: Will my hon. Friend give way?

Simon Hoare: I give way with great pleasure to my hon. Friend, my hon. Friend makes a telling point.

Mr Deputy Speaker (Sir Lindsay Hoyle): Order. We are drifting.

Simon Hoare: I was about to talk about flooding. Mr Deputy Speaker. Drifting and flooding may be linked.

Mr Deputy Speaker: Some might suggest a filibuster, but do carry on.

Simon Hoare: If anyone, Mr Deputy Speaker, were to suggest a filibuster, they would be challenging your authority, because we look to you to ensure that all right hon. and hon. Members remain in order.

Mr Deputy Speaker: Order. You are drifting. Get on with it—come on.

Simon Hoare: Mr Deputy Speaker, you are robust.

Sir Roger Gale: I am enjoying it.
not a fault of the vendor. I recently saw a house for sale in my constituency on which, because of the materials with which it was built, a mortgage cannot be secured. That is not the fault of the vendor, who has been trying to sell it for a considerable period of time. It would, I suggest, be an entirely unforeseen and unjustified consequence if that person were saddled with an onerously high council tax bill at a time when they were legitimately trying to dispose of an asset, but could not do so because nobody could afford to buy because they could not arrange a mortgage for it.

I hope that local authorities will not put into the “too difficult to deal with” box the civil law matter of a family that is rowing among themselves about who actually inherits a house, who has the right to sell it and who wants to inhabit it. We all know that where there is a will there is an argument and that sometimes where there is no will there can be a real cause for concern. Those are the areas of flexibility that our local authority officers and councillors need to be alert to and flexible about. I hope that the Minister can assure me that guidance highlighting the “may” and the need for flexibility and discretion will be pointed out to our local authorities.

Lords amendment I agreed to, with Commons financial privileges waived.

Overseas Electors Bill: Money

Queen’s recommendation signified.

Mr Deputy Speaker (Sir Lindsay Hoyle): I inform the House that Mr Speaker has selected the amendment in the name of the Leader of the Opposition.

4.14 pm

The Parliamentary Secretary, Cabinet Office (Chloe Smith): I beg to move,

That, for the purposes of any Act resulting from the Overseas Electors Bill, it is expedient to authorise the payment out of money provided by Parliament of any increase attributable to the Act in the sums payable under any other Act out of money so provided.

It is a pleasure to bring this motion before the House. I will explain a little about the issues in the Bill. First, let me lay out what the Bill does: it seeks to extend the basis on which British citizens resident outside the UK qualify to participate in parliamentary elections by removing the arbitrary 15-year rule, which prevents British citizens living overseas from registering to vote.

I pay tribute to my hon. Friend the Member for Montgomeryshire (Glyn Davies) for his work in getting the Bill to this point and the effort he has put in to engage with Members across the House to ensure that it has support. I would like to take this opportunity to restate the Government’s commitment to the Bill and their desire to see it succeed. I am very proud to support this policy and this Bill. I would like to ensure that the financial element is set out clearly for the House, and I hope that this resolution will then allow the Bill to move forward to Committee stage.

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Chris Skidmore (Kingswood) (Con): I speak as a former Minister for the Constitution. Does my hon. Friend agree that although this is a private Member’s Bill, which has been promoted and taken forward excellently by my hon. Friend the Member for Montgomeryshire (Glyn Davies), there was a manifesto commitment from the present Government to enfranchise overseas electors, building on their work dating back to October 2016? The whole electoral community has been fully engaged and consulted on the progress of this reform, which is absolutely crucial to enfranchising millions of overseas voters.

Chloe Smith: My hon. Friend is absolutely right, and I pay tribute to him for his work in stewarding this very important reform to this point. He is absolutely correct that that engagement has taken place because he did much of it, and I am very grateful to him for that. He is also absolutely right to remind the House of the Government’s manifesto commitment. It is one that we take very seriously and hope to see enacted as soon as possible for the benefit of British voters.

I would like to address the amendment to the money resolution tabled by the Opposition. It would limit spending under this legislation to £10,000 in any financial year. That limit would remain until the financial year after the Minister—perhaps me—lays before the House a report on spending incurred under the legislation. To put this far more simply than the amendment, that means that there would not be enough money to implement the Bill, and yet the Bill is about enfranchising British citizens. It is about ensuring and broadening participation in our democracy. It is about giving the vote to people
who do not currently have that right because they have moved abroad, but who are none the less British. It is an outrage that Her Majesty’s Opposition are acting in direct opposition to these aims.

Let us start with a matter of principle: in no electoral system do the Government set out how much they plan to spend on registering electors and then register only that many accordingly. That is not how we run our democracy. The Opposition talk of the need to give a voice to the under-represented—it is a theme that they like—but here they are blocking measures that do just that. These measures enfranchise those who were previously registered or resident in this country, and overseas voters are one of the most under-registered groups of all, at about 20% of those eligible.

Alex Burghart (Brentwood and Ongar) (Con): Will the Minister explain to the House the consequences of agreeing the amendment?

Chloe Smith: I certainly will: the amendment would simply starve the Bill of the money that it needs to do its job. It is a blocking amendment, a wrecking amendment—it would do nothing less than stop the policy from taking effect. We think that the policy is important, because it starts from a matter of principle, and we think that the Government should support that principle with the necessary spending. Let us be in no doubt about what the amendment would do. I will offer three reasons why I think the amendment should be rejected: it is convoluted, unrealistic and incoherent.

To start with the first of those, the amendment is Byzantine in its wording and unnecessarily confusing on an issue that really ought to be clear. Parliament has already agreed this policy, on Second reading at a level of principle, so nothing can be clearer than saying to our fellow British citizens that we think they ought to have the vote. This amendment sullies that principle by putting obstacles in its way.

Chris Skidmore: On my calculation, £10,000 spent on the potentially 3 million British nationals abroad who would be enfranchised by the Bill works out at 0.3p per elector. Are the Opposition really saying they value the votes of British citizens living abroad at 0.3p each?

Chloe Smith: In many ways, it is even worse than that. I think the Opposition are saying to overseas electors that their votes do not matter a jot and that they do not want them in our democracy, because they are trying to block a Bill that would enable them to participate.

Alex Chalk: That is precisely right. Again, we should look at the principles involved in this policy question. We are talking about stopping the abrupt disfranchisement of people after an arbitrary amount of time living overseas, which is a deep and terrible injustice to many people. I could mention to the House the case of Harry Shindler. He is war veteran who has fought for this country and who also happens to be one of the oldest members of the Labour party in the country, yet that party will not do him the courtesy of supporting his efforts to overcome this injustice.

Stewart Malcolm McDonald (Glasgow South) (SNP): Can I just check something? If I decide to go and live outside the United Kingdom, could I register to vote in Pimlico, where I currently rent a flat, and be an elector in that constituency?

Chloe Smith: Yes. I think it is basically the hon. Gentleman’s deepest wish that he should live outside the UK. As I understand it, that is the point of the Scottish National party.

Sir Roger Gale (North Thanet) (Con): May we return for a moment to my old friend Harry Shindler? He is 97 years old and has lived in Italy for much of his life, but he is stoically British. He fought at Anzio, where he watched his friends die, and has since sought to establish memorials to them, and he has been honoured for so doing. Furthermore, he is not one of the oldest members, but the oldest member of the Labour party. Can my hon. Friend suggest any reason why the Labour party would want to prevent that old man from voting?

Mr Deputy Speaker (Sir Lindsay Hoyle): Order. We need to stick to the money resolution, as you should know better than anyone, Sir Roger. I want to get on with this, so please can we deal with what is in hand? I do not expect the Minister to be driven off course.

Chloe Smith: Thank you, Mr Deputy Speaker. I thank my hon. Friend for his question, but I will return to the finance matters in front of us.

I will explain why the amendment to the money resolution is unrealistic. The figure in the proposal, £10,000 per annum, is just 1½% of the estimated cost of implementing the Bill. We have published a detailed impact assessment, which I am sure hon. Members will have read, and it outlines how much we expect the measures to cost. I am not backward in coming forward about the amount: we think it will cost £1 million per annum over 10 years. I will put that into context in a moment and explain why we think it is an appropriate figure.

If any Bill becomes law, it should be properly funded, so that is the starting point.

Sir Robert Syms (Poole) (Con): In my time in the House, Oppositions have normally criticised a lack of money for private Members’ Bills to carry out their objectives. It is highly unusual to try to limit the money to £10,000. When was the last time an Opposition did this?

Chloe Smith: As I understand it—you might know this better than I do, Mr Deputy Speaker—it was 1912; it was over a century ago.

Mr Deputy Speaker: I think the hon. Gentleman actually knew the answer.
Chloe Smith: I suspect he did, Mr Deputy Speaker. I think it might be one of those facts that deserves to be more widely known from this Chamber: this was last attempted in 1912. It is a poor proposal to put to Parliament to suggest that a century-old device be used to block an important matter of principle.

The amendment is also fundamentally incoherent. It asks for a report on the operation of a policy that cannot be properly funded. What a waste of taxpayers’ money that would be. What a waste of valuable resources it would be to produce a report that would merely confirm that we needed the money that we had said we needed in the first place, to implement the policy. It would serve no purpose, and I think that this is a rather dishonest amendment.

Bambos Charalambous (Enfield, Southgate) (Lab): The Minister has talked about wasting money. On Wednesday, we shall have met 15 or 16 times to debate the private Member’s Bill introduced by my hon. Friend the Member for Manchester, Gorton (Afzal Khan), purely because the Government will not give us a money resolution so that we can progress with it. Does the Minister agree that if that money resolution were granted, it would save money in the long run?

Chloe Smith: No, because it is the simplest of consistencies to suggest that public money should not be wasted on a Bill that duplicates a measure that is already before the House. That applies to the Bill tabled by the hon. Member for Manchester, Gorton (Afzal Khan), about which we have spoken in another place and which I do not think need trouble the House today.

Mike Amesbury (Weaver Vale) (Lab): Is the Minister considering changing the Government’s position on extending the franchise to people under 18—for example, to 16 and 17-year-olds, who can give their lives for Queen and country?

Chloe Smith: As I think the hon. Gentleman will know, that matter is not in the Bill, so I will restrict myself to comments on the motion. It may come up in Committee, and I look forward to dealing with it then. What I will say is that those who are under 18 can go into battle only with their parents’ consent, which is an important qualification.

Let me now deal with the issue of costs. As the impact assessment says, we expect that over the next 10 years the Bill will result in the processing of more than 600,000 additional applications to register, which will result in an increase in the overall additional costs. Let us also not forget that registration costs for overseas electors are a little higher than those for domestic electors. The approximate cost to an administrator to register a British national who lives in the UK is £1.76 per application, while under the current system it costs £3.82 to process an overseas application. That is because the process is subject to higher international postage costs and more staff time spent on verifying and processing applications. For those who left the UK more than 15 years ago, and who will be enfranchised under this policy, there will be a small additional expense owing to the need to manually check evidence of a previous residency or registration and review any attestations.

Those are the reasons why costs will be higher. The Government are, of course, committed to funding the additional costs that derive from the Bill under what is called the new burdens doctrine: in other words, we do not envisage leaving that burden to local government. Central Government want to assist, and will therefore also face upfront implementation costs, for IT changes and the administering of polls, which will total about £0.9 million.

Bob Stewart (Beckenham) (Con): If someone leaves my constituency and lives abroad for 50 years, will that person still technically be in the constituency of Beckenham when they vote?

Chloe Smith: That is absolutely correct. I am happy to confirm that the intention is to maintain the way in which we currently represent voters who live overseas: they will accrue to the constituency in which they most recently lived.

Susan Elan Jones (Clwyd South) (Lab): I have a related question. Can the Minister confirm that there would be absolutely no way in which such a person could then migrate to another UK constituency?

Chloe Smith: That is correct. The application to register to vote would be tied to the constituency in which the person was last registered or resident. It should not be possible for any individual to say, “Right, I pick that one.”

I have told the House how much it costs to process overseas voters’ applications to register. There are also additional costs, comparatively speaking, associated with overseas electors taking part in polls, and that again is due to things like international postage, where the average cost is again a little higher than it is for domestic voters.

Hugh Gaffney (Coatbridge, Chryston and Bellshill) (Lab): On the question of additional cost, do we expect the numbers to rise if there is no deal on Brexit?

Chloe Smith: I suspect that question has almost nothing to do with the Bill and very little to do with this money resolution to it, but what I would say is this: now is the time, as we change our relationships in this world, to speak loudly and proudly about Britain around the world. Now is the time that we should reach out to our citizens—our people around the world—and say, “You are British, and we are proud that you are British and we welcome you into our democracy.” That is what this Bill is doing; that is the principle that we on the Conservative Benches stand for. I look forward to hearing what those on the other side of the House stand for.

Let me give the House another important figure for context. The cost of putting this measure in place is £1 million, and the amendment suggests that that should be reduced to £10,000. For context, allow me to mention the cost of running a whole parliamentary election in the UK. We do not yet have the cost of the 2017 election, because not all claims have yet been settled, but the 2015 election cost almost £115 million, the 2010 general election cost £104.5 million and the one before that cost £71 million. The cost of parliamentary elections is increasing for other reasons, including more people choosing to vote by post.
Let us return to principle. What we are talking about here is a Bill that puts right an injustice, and that injustice is this: we think British citizens should not be abruptly disfranchised after they have lived for an arbitrary amount of time overseas. The amendment to the money resolution is no more than a shameful wrecking amendment that aims to stop people voting and stop people being disfranchised in this country, and it would cause chaos to the new scheme that the Bill aims to put in place.

We have set out in our impact assessment the costs that accrue to this policy in an entirely reasonable and justifiable manner. This amendment is neither of those things. I commend the money resolution to the House.

4.32 pm

Jo Platt (Leigh) (Lab/Co-op): I beg to move an amendment, to leave out “any increase” and insert “an increase not exceeding £10,000 in any financial year prior to the financial year after the financial year in which a Minister of the Crown lays before the House of Commons a report on the expected increases arising from the Act and any increase thereafter”.

Our electoral law and the franchise is one of the most important issues we can discuss in our democracy, and this money resolution will permit a serious alteration to our franchise. Under current provisions, British citizens who have moved abroad can apply to be registered as a special category of elector: an overseas voter. They must be registered in the last constituency in which they were entered on an electoral register before they moved abroad, and they may only vote in UK parliamentary elections. But the Bill will end the pragmatic and reasoned approach we have taken in this country. Our current 15-year limit to the duration for which an elector can leave the country serves to maintain the vital link between expats and their home country, a link especially pertinent in light of our departure from the European Union, but also one that, crucially, ensures that those elected to this House are representatives of the constituents we are elected by.

Make no mistake: as a modern, progressive socialist party, Labour remains committed to building a truly global Britain, championing our core values of equality, social justice and opportunity for all.

Sir Roger Gale: In passing, the hon. Lady might want to explain why she wants to prevent the oldest living member of the Labour party from voting.

Because I am a bear of small brain, will the hon. Lady help me and the House by explaining what is meant in the Leader of the Opposition’s amendment by “in any financial year prior to the financial year after the financial year”?

That is gobbledygook; what does it mean?

Jo Platt: I thank the hon. Gentleman for his question, which obviously refers to that earlier question, but I need to press on with what I have to say.

Following the 2017 general election, the AEA called in a new report for “urgent and positive Government action”, outlining 33 recommendations to improve the electoral framework in the UK.

Chris Skidmore: On a point of order, Madam Deputy Speaker—

Madam Deputy Speaker (Dame Rosie Winterton): There is an amendment before the House whose text its proposers cannot explain. How can we possibly vote on it if they cannot explain what it means?
Madam Deputy Speaker: That is not a point of order. This is an important debate and we need to get on with it. I do not want it to be disrupted by spurious points of order.

Jo Platt: Thank you, Madam Deputy Speaker.

Following the 2017 general election, the AEA called in a new report for “urgent and positive Government action”, outlining 33 recommendations to improve the electoral framework in the UK. In a recent letter to the Cabinet Office, the AEA’s chief executive, Peter Stanyon, expressed his serious misgivings about a number of issues, including funding and added bureaucracy. He even warned that unless urgent action was taken there would be unnecessary and untenable risks at the next national polls. But what was the Government’s response to such a stark warning, made in that 2017 report? Peter Stanyon received no reply at all. It is extremely concerning that the Minister has shown no urgency in addressing these issues, particularly when we know that due to the shambolic state of her fragile Government, a general election could occur at any time. Perhaps the Minister will therefore be open with the House by publishing her response to the letter and outlining what steps she is taking to address those serious concerns.

The amendment in my name, and in the name of the Leader of the Opposition and others, would also guarantee that we received a report on the total cost incurred under the Bill. That reasoned approach is designed to protect those the Bill will affect the most. I therefore encourage Members on both sides of the House to support the amendment.

It is also important to remember that these administrative challenges have arisen at a time of unprecedented cuts to local government funding. A survey response from 250 local and electoral authorities that administered the EU referendum found that only a quarter of electoral services and oversee significant reductions in core service funding and staffing levels. Our amendment would protect local authorities from being held in limbo by the Government.

According to the AEA, there is a growing retention crisis, as those with vital skills and experience understandably leave the profession. To see the consequences of the Government’s policies, we need only look to the borough of Newcastle-under-Lyme, where two council officials were suspended after almost 1,500 people were unable to vote in last year’s general election. Investigations found that it was a result of “inadequate performance by under-resourced elections office staff”.

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, where 6,500 electors were unable to cast their vote in the 2017 general election.

That does not only affect voters. We have seen that such pressures are also having a significant impact on the health and wellbeing of electoral administrators. Following last year’s general election, the AEA wrote that “we have collectively been concerned for the health and well-being of all of our members”.

As a result, the AEA contracted the Hospital and Medical Care Association to provide members with free access to a confidential counselling service. Let us think about that for a minute. We have reached a point where free counselling is being offered to election teams in the aftermath of a national poll. How has it come to that?

The Government’s decision to abolish the 15-year rule without addressing those serious concerns is therefore irresponsible in the extreme, as outlined by the Electoral Commission:

“Increasing the number of British citizens overseas who are eligible to be registered to vote will add strain to already stretched resources of electoral administrators, in terms of volume and complexity of registration applications, requiring verification of identities and eligibility of applicants who have not lived in the UK for some time.”

Do the Government have an 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 if the 15-year rule were removed? Do they have any idea of the strain that would put on already stretched public services?

According to the Cabinet Office:

“Most of the costs of the new policy would be incurred by the local authorities in the first instance”.

Local authorities are already left at breaking point by this Government’s austerity regime and have not received any further detail of their commitment on overseas voters, leaving local electoral registration officers in the dark about how they will cope with this extensive administrative task. It is extremely reckless to leave local authorities in this funding limbo.

In addition to all that, the Government are planning to roll out mandatory voter identification in polling stations across Britain, an extremely expensive policy that could cost up to £20.4 million per general election. Given their record, do they seriously believe they have the resourcing or the ability to deliver on both pledges?

The electoral community has also warned that the proposals leave the registration system wide open to abuse, an issue that appears to be of little concern to the Government. Under the new system, for example, overseas electors will need to prove their eligibility. Documentary evidence may be required to establish their connection with their registration address. However, supplying a single piece of evidence at a single point in time does not prove residency, particularly with regard to the definitions provided in section 5 of the Representation of the People Act 1983. For example, an overseas elector may invest in a property before leaving the UK but may not have lived there, yet they will have a solicitor’s letter confirming the house purchase and are likely also to have a local authority council tax bill—those are two pieces of evidence outlined in the Government’s proposals. In response to the Cabinet Office policy statement regarding overseas voters, the AEA also warned of the possibility of increased applications via this route in marginal constituencies. Not only is the likelihood of error extremely high, but we are now leaving our democracy wide open to potential fraudulent activity.

I wish to end my speech with a moment of unity. I am sure the Minister and Members throughout the House will agree that our country is famous for
many things. For example, this House is rightly known as the “mother of all Parliaments”. Indeed, our whole Westminster model of parliamentary democracy is regarded by many as a beacon of democracy and has been adopted by countless nations around the world. At its heart are the rules-based procedures and courtesies that we abide by. One key example is that the Government of the day table a money resolution for any private Member’s Bill that has received a Second Reading. Until recently that was nothing other than a formality, yet this Government have completely dismantled that tradition and procedure.

Sir Roger Gale rose—

Jo Platt: I am about to finish, and I need to finish this point.

Having decided that they did not like the premise of the Bill promoted by my hon. Friend the Member for Manchester, Gorton (Afzal Khan), the Government took the unprecedented decision to refuse to grant a money resolution and, in doing so, prevent the passage of his Bill through Parliament.

If the Conservatives were serious about improving democratic engagement, they would give electoral administrators and our local authorities the resources they need to run elections effectively; they would concentrate efforts on registering the millions of adults in this country not currently on the electoral roll; and they would extend the franchise to 16 and 17-year-olds. Instead we have a Government rewriting the rules when it suits them, yet again placing party before country.

The Bill addresses a crucial gap in our electorate, whereby currently 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. Those electors should be recognised as an integral part of our democracy, on a simple point of fairness. Many 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 and continue to have a direct interest in their pension rights. Many moved overseas to work, not having much choice, but will eventually return home to the UK on their retirement. Many have family connections that they wish to retain. Many want to retain the ability to communicate through the often unseen processes of maintained British influence all over the world, usually referred to as soft power, which is incredibly important.

Alex Burghart: My hon. Friend raises a point that is close to my heart. A good friend of mine has been working in the charitable sector in Africa for 17 years and is now unentitled to vote. Does my hon. Friend find it outrageous that a British citizen who has gone abroad to work so hard has been excluded from voting here?

Glyn Davies: I certainly do. That is an example of why the Bill is important.

I know that others wish to speak, so I shall finish by saying that a detailed impact assessment has been submitted alongside the Bill. I refer right hon. and hon. Members to that impact assessment for a full overview of the costings.

4.50 pm

David Linden (Glasgow East) (SNP): When I was elected to this place, I did not think that I would take such a keen interest in money resolutions and the private Members’ Bills process, but it is with a degree of trepidation that I have found myself down the rabbit warren of parliamentary procedure. I speak specifically about my experience serving on the Public Bill Committee for the Parliamentary Constituencies (Amendment) Bill.

It was with a degree of surprise that I saw on today’s Order Paper that the House was to be asked to agree to a money resolution given that two other Members—namely, the hon. Member for Manchester, Gorton (Afzal Khan) and my hon. Friend the Member for Na h-Eileanan an Iar (Angus Brendan MacNeil)—have introduced private Members’ Bills that the House has voted democratically to give a Second Reading, but the Government have chosen, in an abuse of their Executive power, not to grant money resolutions on those Bills. As a result, the Parliamentary Constituencies (Amendment) Bill Committee, on which I serve, is currently in parliamentary purgatory. We have met in excess of 12 or 13 times on a Wednesday morning to consider a motion to adjourn. Because we do not have a money resolution, we cannot consider the Bill clause by clause and line by line, nor can we consider any amendments.

There is certainly a case of double standards here. It is inherently unfair that the Government are abusing their Executive power to stonewall private Members’ Bills, but the hon. Member for Montgomeryshire (Glyn Davies) has brought forward his Bill—which is further down the queue than the Bills of the hon. Member for Manchester, Gorton and of my hon. Friend the Member
for Na h-Eileanan an Iar—and it will progress on the back of the money resolution provided by the Government today.

The nature of this Parliament means that numbers are tight. The Government would do well to reflect on the tight parliamentary arithmetic. Their colleagues in the Democratic Unionist party currently seem to be holding a gun to their head and refusing to join them in the Lobbies. When the House divides in a few moments, we will see whether colleagues from Northern Ireland will join the Government in the Lobby.

Let me turn to the Bill. The right to vote is the bedrock of our democracy and no politician should get in the way of the public exercising that right, but I find myself somewhat in disagreement with the proposal from the hon. Member for Montgomeryshire. To be consistent, I take the view that the voting franchise should generally be as we had it in the 2014 independence referendum in Scotland: anyone living in the country should be able to vote. There should obviously be exemptions for those who work overseas, but the fundamental point remains that those who have the greatest stake in the nation’s future should be able to vote. In my view, that means that everyone over the age of 16 who lives in the country should be allowed to vote. In Scotland, we have extended the right to vote to 16 and 17-year-olds and I shall vocally press the UK Government to do likewise.

Alex Burghart: In a hypothetical future referendum on Scottish independence, does the hon. Gentleman think that a Scotsman living in, say, Pimlico should be able to vote on the question of Scottish independence?

David Linden: In the 2014 referendum, the franchise was that those who lived in the country should be able to vote and our position now is no different. Perhaps the hon. Gentleman and I can discuss it and I can explain it to him so that he understands it better, but—

Madam Deputy Speaker (Dame Rosie Winterton): Order. I remind the House that the debate should be about the financial implications of the Bill.

David Linden: I am grateful, Madam Deputy Speaker. I have outlined a couple of options that the Government could pursue if they seriously wanted to extend democracy, but if they want to be the great champions of democracy, they should bring forward money resolutions for the two private Members’ Bills that were given a Second Reading by this House, because a failure to do so would only reaffirm the Scottish National party’s belief that this is a place of limited democracy and double standards.

4.54 pm

Sir Roger Gale (North Thanet) (Con): Madam Deputy Speaker, I understand entirely that this debate is about the money resolution and the amendment, but you will forgive me if I say that much of the Opposition Front-Bench spokeswoman’s speech was devoted to the political implications of the extension of the vote to expat UK citizens. Such a device has not been used since 1912, and it is being used quite cynically by the Leader of the Opposition as a backdoor way of trying to kill a piece of legislation that some of us have been working on for a very long time, and I make no apology for referring back to the case of Harry Shindler.

Harry and I have been working on this project for more years than I care to remember. Harry is 97. He is about as British as anybody possibly could be. He happens to live in Italy, where some of his family live. He fought at Anzio. He came back to the United Kingdom. He worked and he paid his taxes. He then went back to Italy, where he continues to spend his retirement working in the interests of his fallen comrades to ensure that their graves are properly looked after and that memorials are erected. Harry also happens to be literally the longest-serving member of the Labour party, but that does not stop us being good friends. It does not prevent us from making common cause, because Harry believes, as I believe, that people who are UK citizens, who have paid their taxes throughout their working lives, and who are receiving pensions, albeit while living in other countries, should have the right to vote.

The hon. Member for Leigh (Jo Platt) said that we are proud to be one of the oldest democracies in the world. We are, but we also happen to be one of the oldest democracies in the developed world that does not give lifelong voting rights to its expat citizens, which cannot be right. I oppose the Opposition amendment simply on the grounds that this has nothing to do with democracy or with resources. If it had anything to do with resources—this comes back to the money—and if we were so concerned about the financing of the proposals, why are the Opposition proposing to give votes to 16 to 18-year-olds, who have mostly never paid a dime in taxation in their lives, while seeking to continue to deny the voting rights of expat UK citizens who have paid their way throughout their working lives?

David Linden: I left school at 16 years old and did not get to vote until I was 18, but I paid taxes during the two years that I was unable to vote in elections to this Parliament. That is a nonsense argument.

Sir Roger Gale: I know some such young people, but at most they could have paid two years’ worth of taxes. Harry Shindler paid taxes for years and gave blood and fought for his country. I am afraid that Opposition Members are seeking to denigrate the right to be British and to vote as British, which I regard as an absolute disgrace—

4.59 pm

Three quarters of an hour having elapsed since the commencement of proceedings on the motion, the Deputy Speaker put the Questions necessary to dispose of the proceedings (Standing Order No. 52(1)(b)).

Question put, That the amendment be made.

The House divided: Ayes 259, Noes 296.

Division No. 241

[4.59 pm]

AYES

Abbott, rh Ms Diane
Abrahams, Debbie
Ali, Rushanara
Alin-Khan, Dr Rosena
Amesbury, Mike
Antoniazzi, Tonia
Ashworth, Jonathan
Austin, Ian

NAEES
Blackman-Woods, Dr
Blackman, Kirsty
Betts, Mr Clive
Blackman-Woods, Dr
Barron, rh Sir Kevin
Beckett, Mr Clive
Barron, rh Sir Kevin
Brock, Deidre
Brown, Alan
Brown, Lyn
Brown, rh Mr Nicholas
Bryant, Chris
Buck, Ms Karen
Burden, Richard
Burgon, Richard
Butler, Dawn
Caddy, Ruth
Cameron, Dr Lisa
Campbell, rh Mr Alan
Campbell, Mr Ronnie
Carden, Dan
Champion, Sarah
Chapman, Jenny
Charalambous, Bambos
Cherry, Joanna
Coaker, Vernon
Coffey, Ann
Cooper, Julie
Cooper, Rosie
Cooper, rh Yvette
Corbyn, rh Jeremy
Cowan, Ronnie
Coyle, Neil
Crausby, Sir David
Crawley, Angela
Creasy, Stella
Cruddas, Jon
Cryer, John
Cummins, Judith
Cunningham, Alex
Cunningham, Mr Jim
Daby, Janet
Dakin, Nic
Davies, Geraint
Day, Martyn
De Cordova, Marsha
De Piero, Gloria
Debbonaire, Thangam
Dent Coad, Emma
Dhesi, Mr Tanmanjeet Singh
 Docherty-Hughes, Martin
Dodds, Anneliese
Doughty, Stephen
Dowd, Peter
Drew, Dr David
Dromey, Jack
Duffield, Rosie
Eagle, Ms Angela
Eagle, Maria
Edwards, Jonathan
Efford, Clive
Elliott, Julie
Ellman, Dame Louise
Elmore, Chris
Esterson, Bill
Evans, Chris
Farrelly, Paul
Fellows, Marion
Field, rh Frank
Fitzpatrick, Jim
Fletcher, Colleen
Flint, rh Caroline
Fovargue, Yvonne
Foxcroft, Vicky
Fris, James
Furniss, Gill
Gaffney, Hugh
Gardiner, Barry
George, Ruth
Gethins, Stephen
Gibson, Patricia
Gill, Preet Kaur
Gilmour, Mary
Godsil, Mr Roger
Goodman, Helen
Grady, Patrick
Grant, Peter
Gray, Neil
Greenwood, Margaret
Griffith, Nia
Gwynne, Andrew
Haigh, Louise
Hamilton, Fabian
Hanney, Mr David
Hardy, Emma
Harris, Carolyn
Hayes, Helen
Hayman, Sue
Healey, rh John
Hendry, Drew
Heburn, Mr Stephen
Hill, Mr Rupa
Hussain, Imran
Jones, Darren
Jones, Gerald
Jones, Graham
Jones, Helen
Jones, Sarah
Jones, Susan Elan
Kane, Mike
Keeley, Barbara
Kendall, Liz
Khan, Afzal
Killed, Ged
Kinnock, Stephen
Kyle, Peter
Laird, Lesley
Lake, Ben
Lammy, rh Mr David
Lavery, Ian
Law, Chris
Lee, Karen
Leslie, Mr Chris
Lewell-Buck, Mrs Emma
Lewis, Clive
Linden, David
Lloyd, Tony
Long, Bailey, Rebecca
Lucas, Caroline
Lucas, Ian C.
Madders, Justin
Mahmood, Mr Khalid
Mahmood, Shabana
Malhotra, Seema
Mann, John
Marsden, Gordon
Martin, Sandy
Maskell, Rachael
Mc Nally, John
McCabe, Steve
McCarthy, Kerry
McDonald, Andy
McDonald, Stuart Malcolm
McDonnell, rh John
McFadden, rh Mr Pat
McGovern, Alison
McInnes, Liz
McKinnell, Catherine
McMahon, Jim
McMorris, Anna
Mears, Ian
Miliband, rh Edward
Moon, Mrs Madeleine
Morden, Jessica
Morgan, Stephen
Morris, Grahame
Murray, Ian
Nandy, Lisa
Newlands, Gavin
Norris, Alex
O’Hara, Brendan
O’Mara, Jared
Onasanya, Fiona
Onn, Melanie
Onwurah, Chi
Osamor, Kate
Owen, Albert
Pearce, Teresa
Pennycook, Matthew
Perkins, Toby
Phillips, Jess
Piatt, Jo
Pollard, Luke
Pound, Stephen
Powell, Lucy
Rayner, Angela
Reed, Mr Steve
Rees, Christina
Reeves, Ellie
Reeves, Rachel
Reynolds, Emma
Reynolds, Jonathan
Rimmer, Ms Marie
Rodda, Matt
Rowley, Danielle
Ruane, Chris
Russell-Moyle, Lloyd
Saville Roberts, Liz
Shah, Naz
Sharma, Mr Virendra
Sherriff, Paula
Shuker, Mr Gavin
Siddiq, Tulip
Skinner, Mr Dennis
Slaughter, Andy
Smeeth, Ruth
Smith, Angela
Smith, Eleanor
Smith, Jeff
Smith, Laura
Smith, Owen
Smyth, Karin
Snell, Gareth
Sobel, Alex
Spellar, rh John
Starmer, rh Keir
Stephens, Chris
Stevens, Jo
Streeting, Wes
Styger, Graham
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, Stephen
Twist, Liz
Umunna, Chuka
Vaz, rh Keith
Vaz, Valerie
Walker, Thelma
Watson, Tom
West, Catherine
Whitehead, Dr Alan
Whitfield, Martin
Whitford, Dr Philippa
Williams, Hywel
Williams, Dr Paul
Williamson, Chris
Wilson, Phil
Wishart, Pete
Woodcock, John
Yasin, Mohammad
Zeichner, Daniel

Tellers for the Ayes:
Stephanie Peacock and Nick Smith

NOES
Baker, Mr Steve
Baldwin, Harriett
Barclay, Stephen
Bebb, Guto
Bellingham, Sir Henry
Benyon, rh Richard
Beresford, Sir Paul
Berry, Jake
Blackman, Bob
Blunt, Crispin
Boles, Nick
Bose, Mr Peter
Question accordingly negatived.

Main Question put.
**The House divided: Ayes 308, Noes 260.**

**Division No. 242**

### AYES

- Adams, Nigel
- Afzal, Imran
- Afzali, Adam
- Aidoo, Peter
- Allison, 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
- Bebb, Guto
- Bellingham, Sir Henry
- Benyon, rh Richard
- Beresford, Mr Paul
- Blackman, Bob
- Blunt, Crispin
- Boles, Nick
- Bone, Mr Peter
- Bottomley, Sir Peter
- Bowie, Andrew
- Bradley, Ben
- Bradley, rh Karen
- Brady, Sir Graham
- Brake, rh Tom
- Braverman, Suella
- Breer, Jack
- Bridgen, Andrew
- Brine, Steve
- Brokenshire, Sir James
- Bruce, Fiona
- Buckland, Robert
- Burghart, Alex
- Burns, Conor
- Burt, rh Alistair
- Cable, rh Sir Vince
- Cairns, rh Alun
- Campbell, Mr Gregory
- Carmichael, rh Mr Alistair
- Carling, Mrs Theresa
- Cash, Sir William
- Chalk, Alex
- Chishti, Rehman
- Chope, Sir Christopher
- Churchill, Jo
- Clark, rh Greg
- Clarke, rh Mr Kenneth
- Clarke, Mr Simon
- Cleverly, James
- Clifton-Brown, Sir Geoffrey
- Coffey, Dr Therese
- Collins, Damian
- Costa, Alberto
- Cox, rh Mr Geoffrey
- Crabbe, rh Stephen
- Crouch, Tracey
- Davey, rh Sir Edward
- Davies, Chris
- Davies, David T. C.
- Davies, Glyn
- Davies, Philho
- Davis, rh Mr David
- Dinenage, Caroline
- Dinenage, Rhys
- Dinenage, Sir John
- Donelan, Michelle
- Dowd, Mr Paul
- Drax, Richard
- Duddridge, James
- Duguid, David
- Duncan, rh Sir Alan
- Dunne, Mr Philip
- Ellis, Michael
- Ellwood, rh Mr Tobias
- Elphicke, Charlie
- Eustice, George
- Evennett, rh Sir David
- Fabricant, Michael
- Fallon, rh Sir Michael
- Farron, Tim
- Field, rh Mark
- Ford, Vicky
- Foster, Kevin
- Fox, rh Dr Liam
- Francois, rh Mr Mark
- Frazer, Lucy
- Freeman, George
- Freer, Mike
- Gale, Sir Roger
- Garnier, Mark
- Gauke, rh Mr David
- Ghani, Ms Nusrat
- Gibb, rh Nick
- Gillan, rh Dame Cheryl
- Girvan, Paul
- Glen, John
- Goldsmith, Zac
- Goodwill, rh Mr Robert
- Gove, rh Michael
- Graham, Luke
- Graham, Richard
- Grant, Bill
- Grant, rh Mrs Helen
- Gray, James
- Green, Chris
- Green, rh Damian
- Greening, rh Justine
- Grieve, rh Mr Dominic
- Griffiths, Andrew
- Gyimah, rh 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
- Heath, rh Harris, Chris
- Heaton-Jones, Peter
- Henderson, Gordon
- Herbert, rh Nick
- Hinds, rh Damian
- Hoare, Simon
- Hobhouse, Wera
- Hollingbery, George
- Holinrake, Kevin
- Hollobone, Mr Philip
- Holloway, Adam
- Howell, John
- Huddleston, Nigel
- Hughes, Eddie
- Hunt, rh Mr Jeremy
- Jack, Mr Alister
- James, Margot
- Jardine, Christine
- Javid, rh Sajid
- Jayawardena, Mr Ranil
- Jenkin, Sir Bernard
- Jenkyns, Andrea
- Jernick, Robert
- Johnson, rh Boris
- Johnson, Dr Caroline
- Johnson, rh Gareth
- Johnson, Joseph
- Jones, Andrew
- Jones, rh Mr David
- Jones, Mr Marcus
- Kawczynski, Daniel
- Keegan, Gillian
- Kennedy, Seema
- Kerr, Stephen
- Knight, Julian
- Kwarteng, Kwasi
- Lamb, rh Norman
- Lamont, 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
- Little Pengelly, Emma
- Lloyd, Stephen
- Lopresti, Jack
- Lord, Mr Jonathan
- Loughton, Tim
- Madeleine, Ralph
- Main, Mrs Anne
- Mak, Alan
- Malthouse, Kit
- Mann, Scott
- Masterton, Paul
- Maynard, Paul
- McLoughlin, rh Sir Patrick
- McVey, rh Ms Esther
- Menzies, Mark
- Mercer, Johnny
- Merriman, Huw
- Metcalfe, Stephen
- Miller, rh Mrs Maria
- Milling, Amanda
- Mills, Nigel
- Milton, rh Anne
- Mitchell, rh Mr Andrew
- Moore, Damien
- Moran, Layla
- Mordaunt, rh Penny
- Morgan, rh Nicky
- Morris, Anne Marie
- Morris, David
- Morris, James
- Mundell, rh David
- Murray, Mrs Sheryll
-Neill, Robert
- Newton, Sarah
- Nokes, rh Caroline
- Norman, Jesse
- O’Brien, Neil
- Offord, Dr Matthew
- Opperman, Guy
- Parish, Neil
- Patel, rh Priti
- Paterson, rh Mr Owen
- Pawsley, Mark
- Penning, rh Sir Mike
- Penrose, John
- Perry, rh Claire
- Philp, Chris
- Pincher, Christopher
- Poulter, Dr Dan
- Prentis, Victoria
- Prisk, Mr Mark
- Pritchard, Mark
- Pursglove, Tom
- Quin, Jeremy
- Quince, Will
- Raab, rh Dominic
- Redwood, rh John
- Rees-Mogg, Mr Jacob
- 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
- Shelbrooke, Alec
- Simpson, David
- Skidmore, Chris
- Smith, Chloe
- Smith, Henry
- Smith, rh Julian
- Smith, rh Rosyton
- Soames, rh Sir Nicholas
- Soubry, rh Anna
- Spelman, rh Dame Caroline
- Spencer, Mark
- Stephenson, Andrew
- Stevenson, John
- Stewart, Bob
- Stewart, Iain
- Stewart, Rory
- Stone, Jamie
- Streeter, Mr Gary
- Stride, rh Mel
- Stuart, Graham
- Sturby, Julian
- Sunak, Rishi
- Swain, rh Sir Desmond
- Swire, rh Sir Hugo
- Symes, rh Sir Robert
- Thomas, Derek
- Thomson, Ross
Cunningham, Mr Jim  
Cummins, Judith  
Cryer, John  
Cummings, Mr Jim  
Daby, Janet  
Dakin, Nic  
Warburton, David  
Warman, Matt  
Whately, Helen  
Wheeler, Mrs Heather  
Whittaker, Craig  
Wiggin, Bill  
Williamson, rh Gavin  
Wilson, rh Sammy  
Wollaston, Dr Sarah  
Wood, Mike  
Wragg, Mr William  
Wright, rh Jeremy  
Zahawi, Nadhim  
**Tell for the Ayes:**  
Mims Davies and Wendy Morton  
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Abbott, rh Ms Diane  
Abrahams, Debbie  
Ali, Rushanara  
Allin-Khan, Dr Rosena  
Amsbury, Mike  
Antoniacci, Tonia  
Ashworth, Jonathan  
Austin, Ian  
Bailey, Mr Adrian  
Barron, rh Sir Kevin  
Beckett, rh Margaret  
Benn, rh Hilary  
Betts, Mr Clive  
Blackman, Kirsty  
Blackman-Woods, Dr Roberta  
Blomfield, Paul  
Brabin, Tracy  
Brennan, Kevin  
Brock, Deidre  
Brown, Alan  
Brown, Lyn  
Brown, rh Mr Nicholas  
Buck, Mr Ms  
Burden, Richard  
Burgon, Richard  
Butler, Dawn  
Byrne, rh Liam  
Cadbury, Ruth  
Cameron, Dr Lisa  
Campbell, rh Mr Alan  
Campbell, Mr Ronnie  
Carden, Dan  
Champion, Sarah  
Chapman, Jenny  
Charalambous, Bambos  
Cherry, Joanna  
Coaker, Vernon  
Coffey, Ann  
Cooper, Rosie  
Cooper, rh Yvette  
Corbyn, rh Jeremy  
Cowan, Ronnie  
Coyle, Neil  
Crausby, Sir David  
Crawley, Angela  
Creasy, Stella  
Cruddas, Jon  
Cryer, John  
Cummins, Judith  
Cunningham, Alex  
Cunningham, Mr Jim  
Dabby, Adam  
Dakin, Nic  
Hayes, Helen  
Hayman, Sue  
Healey, rh John  
Hendy, Drew  
Heppburn, Mr Stephen  
Hill, Mike  
Hiller, Meg  
Hodge, rh Dame Margaret  
Hodgson, Mrs Sharon  
Hollern, Kate  
Hopkins, Kelvin  
Hosie, Stewart  
Howarth, rh Mr George  
Huq, Dr Rupa  
Hussain, Imran  
Jones, Darren  
Jones, Gerald  
Jones, rh Mr Graham P.  
Jones, Helen  
Jones, Sarah  
Jones, Susan Elan  
Kane, Mike  
Keeley, Barbara  
Kendall, Liz  
Khan, Afzal  
Kilien, Ged  
Kinnock, Stephen  
Kyle, Peter  
Laird, Lesley  
Lake, Ben  
Lammy, rh Mr David  
Lavery, lan  
Law, Chris  
Lee, Karen  
Leslie, Mr Chris  
Lewell-Buck, Mrs Emma  
Lewis, Clive  
Lewis, Mr Ivan  
Linden, David  
Lloyd, Tony  
Long Bailey, Rebecca  
Lucas, Caroline  
Lucas, Ian C.  
Madders, Justin  
Mahmood, Mr Khalid  
Mahmood, Shabana  
Malhotra, Seema  
Mann, John  
Marshden, Gordon  
Martin, Sandy  
Maskell, Rachael  
Mc Nally, John  
McCabe, Steve  
McCarthy, Kerry  
McDonald, Andy  
McDonald, Stewart Malcolm  
McDonald, Stuart C.  
McDonnell, rh John  
McFadden, rh Mr Pat  
McGovern, Alison  
McInnes, Liz  
McKinnell, Catherine  
McMahon, Jim  
McMorrin, Anna  
Mearens, Ian  
Miliband, rh Edward  
Moon, Mrs Madeleine  
Morden, Jessica  
Morgan, Stephen  
Morris, Graham  
Murray, Ian  
Nandy, Lisa  
Newlands, Gavin  
Norris, Alex  
O'Hara, Brendan  
O'Mara, Jared  
Onasanya, Fiona  
Onn, Melanie  
Onwurah, Chi  
Osamor, Kate  
Owen, Albert  
Pearce, Terese  
Pennycook, Matthew  
Perkins, Toby  
Phillips, Jess  
Platt, Jo  
Polland, Luke  
Pound, Stephen  
Powell, Lucy  
Rayner, Angela  
Reed, Mr Steve  
Rees, Christina  
Reeves, Ellie  
Reeves, Rachel  
Reynolds, Emma  
Reynolds, Jonathan  
Rimmer, Ms Marie  
Rodda, Matt  
Rowley, Danielle  
Ruang, Chris  
Russell-Moyle, Lloyd  
Saville Roberts, Liz  
Shah, Naz  
Sharma, Mr Virendra  
Sheppard, Tommy  
Sherriff, Paula  
Shuker, Mr Gavin  
Siddiq, Tulip  
Skinner, Mr Dennis  
Slaughter, Andy  
Smeeth, Ruth  
Smith, Angela  
Smith, Eleanor  
Smith, Jeff  
Smith, Laura  
Smith, Owen  
Smyth, Karin  
Snell, Gareth  
Sobel, Alex  
Spellar, rh John  
Slarmer, rh Keir  
Stephens, Chris  
Stevens, Jo  
Streeting, Wes  
Stringer, Graham  
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, Stephen  
Twist, Liz  
Ummuna, Chuka  
Vaz, rh Keith  
Vaz, Valerie  
Walker, Thelma  
Watson, Tom  
West, Catherine  
Whitehead, Dr Alan
Ms Karen Buck (Westminster North) (Lab): I beg to move, That the Bill be now read a Second time.

I am very pleased to introduce the Bill. It is an important and, I hope, uncontroversial piece of proposed legislation. I do so partly as a constituency Member of Parliament whose constituency includes one of the prestigious member institutions of the University of London, the London Business School, and as a London MP who recognises the huge importance of the University of London overall to the economy and cultural life of our city and to our international standing.

The Bill’s primary purpose is to correct an historical anomaly and enable the various colleges and institutes that are currently members of the federal university to become universities in their own right, while also remaining a part of the University of London. The University of London was established by charter in 1836, although its history long predates that. It demonstrated an early commitment to diversity and to widening access by becoming the secular alternative to Oxford and Cambridge. The university’s present charter has been supplemented by a number of Acts of Parliament that prescribe its governance arrangements. The current arrangements are enshrined in the University of London Act 1994. I will be referring to the 1994 Act in the course of my comments.

The university was created as a federal institution in which colleges provided the teaching in accordance with the curriculum determined at the centre. For over 100 years, the university was directly funded as a single entity, distributing resources out to the colleges, all of which were originally also governed by centrally determined regulations on academic and other matters. Over the years, that position has wholly changed. The university remains a federal institution with 18 members, all of which are self-governing and autonomous, and most of which operate under separate royal charters.

Henry Smith ( Crawley) (Con): I graduated from University College London in 1991, when of course that institution was part of the federation of London University. I always thought it rather odd that, when UCL left and the federation continued because of the 1994 Act, the remaining colleges in the federation were restricted. Does the hon. Lady agree that the colleges being able to obtain university status, subject to this proposed legislation passing, will increase their global standing, which is even more important as this country leaves the European Union?

Ms Buck: I very much agree with the hon. Gentleman; that is absolutely at the heart of the Bill.

John Howell (Henley) (Con): In my role as the Prime Minister’s trade envoy to Nigeria, we are trying to sell educational establishments in such countries. It is very difficult to sell the University of London, because people do not see it as a university; they see the colleges as having university status. Does the hon. Lady think that this will make my life easier?
Ms Buck: I believe that nothing is more important than to make the hon. Gentleman’s life easier, so I am pleased to broadly confirm—I hope—exactly what he is saying. There is a fundamental lack of clarity internationally. Many people in this country understand the importance of the University of London’s member institutes, which have fantastic reputations. However, particularly in the global marketplace for education, there is, as he describes, a lack of clarity about the overarching University of London structure and the institutes that are, in some cases, called colleges and schools. I went to the London School of Economics and some people will not understand the difference between that and a university, so the hon. Gentleman is completely right, as I will confirm even further as I work through my remarks.

The member institutes set their own academic criteria and in most cases have their own degree-awarding powers. In addition to the London Business School in my constituency, the colleges include University College London—called somewhat confusingly both a university and a college—King’s College, the London School of Economics, Birkbeck and the newest arrival, City University, which joined the federation only in 2016. Imperial College, on the other hand, left the federation in 2007, having no other option at the time for it to achieve university status.

The University of London provides a range of opt-in central services to its member institutions, including the university library at Senate House, in which I spent many happy hours, the careers service and collaboration with the university on its international academy programme, which provides distance learning to over 50,000 students worldwide. Members pay an annual subscription to the university and terms of federation membership are prescribed in the university’s statutes.

The key rationale for the Bill, as I said in response to interventions, is that it will facilitate the university’s member institutions becoming universities in their own right. The Higher Education and Research Act 2017 changed the regulatory landscape for the higher education sector. It opened it up to new providers and shortened the process for obtaining degree-awarding powers and, crucially, for obtaining university title.

Without this Bill, relatively unknown higher education providers will be able to obtain university status while institutions such as the LSE, UCL and King’s will not. The Bill therefore ensures that such institutions are not placed at a disadvantage in the increasingly competitive market for students and teachers. Branding can matter, even for institutions with reputations as high as those I have mentioned, and some of the member institutions have found that their status as a college can cause confusion. The term “college” can suggest that the institutions are subsidiary bodies of the University of London, when they are in fact self-governing, setting their own entrance criteria and, in the majority of cases, having degree-awarding powers. They are therefore universities in all but name.

The process for institutions applying for university status is governed by the Higher Education and Research Act. Any member institution seeking to become a university in its own right will need to apply to the Office for Students for permission. How does the Bill facilitate that process? The 1994 Act described the University of London member institutions as colleges, and as I have explained, that is increasingly unhelpful, so clause 2 would define membership of the federation as including any University of London institution that has the “status of a university”. Not all member institutions will want or be able to become universities. Not all award their own degrees, for example, and that is a necessary condition of becoming a university. The definition of a member institution maintains the reference to an institution that has the status of a college under the University of London statutes. Whether a university in its own right or a college under statutes, all member institutions will enjoy an equal status within the University of London federation.

Twelve out of the 18 member institutions now wish to seek university status and are presently applying for such permission. As all 12 are long-established and high-quality providers of higher education, it is anticipated that the Office for Students will recommend to the Privy Council that the change of status be approved. The Government have insisted that Privy Council approval is dependent on the Bill obtaining Royal Assent, so to be clear: no member institution will be permitted to become a university in its own right unless the Bill is enacted.

I turn now to the provisions on the making of University of London statutes. These statutes set the objects and powers of the university and establish and define the powers of the university’s institutions. To explain the procedure for making statutes is immediately to identify why reform is needed. The prescribed procedure involves two defunct bodies and a procedure requiring the active engagement of the college governing bodies, which have made it clear that they do not regard such a process as appropriate to the modern federal relationship.

The power to make statutes is conferred on the council of the university—a body that no longer exists. The draft of the 1994 Act anticipated changes in university governance, and the term used in the Act to refer to the council also applies to “such other body as the statutes may from time to time designate as the governing and executive body of the University”.

Since 2003, the governing body has been known as the board of trustees, and so, in accordance with the flexible definition of “the council” in the 1994 Act, statutes may be made by the board. That is not clear, however, from the 1994 Act. Furthermore, under section 3 of the Act, the text of any proposed statutes must be sent to the University of London convocation, as the association of graduates of the university, but it ceased to exist in 2003. The Bill will ensure that the terms used in legislation reflect the actual terms now used to describe the various University of London bodies.

The 1994 Act allows statutory consultees a very generous period of four months in which to make representations on proposals. If the governing body then wishes to proceed to make the statutes, it must pass two separate resolutions, with an interval of not less than one and not more than six months, and the statutes only have effect following approval of Her Majesty in Council. That is how University of London statute is made. Whatever the virtues of the system, swiftness is not one. The university regards the process as cumbersome and unnecessarily protracted, and the college governing bodies do not wish to continue with a process that once made sense but which is no longer appropriate.

Sir Christopher Chope (Christchurch) (Con): Is it right to say that the view of the university is that the
other encumbrances in the process are what cause the delay, not the Privy Council stage, which is a very quick stage?

Ms Buck: Absolutely. The cause of the difficulty is the combination of the length of the consultation and the notional involvement of bodies that no longer exist.

Quite simply, the ever-evolving relationship with 18 member institutions and the need to keep in line with the regular changes to higher education regulation mean the university needs to be able to refresh its statutes from time to time in a more dynamic way.

I want to be clear on one matter before I turn to the proposals for streamlining the statute-making powers. The university does not see the revision of the statute-making powers as an excuse to downgrade its obligations to consult. It is committed to undertaking effective consultation and understands this to be vital to the formation of statutes that command support and confidence. The Bill envisages that the initiative for making statutes will come from the board of trustees as the governing body of the university. Clause 3, however, also enables the collegiate council, which advises the board on all matters concerning the university, to submit its own proposals for consideration.

Ultimately, however, the board can reject the council’s initiative, reflecting the fact that it is the supreme decision-making body of the university. Statutes cannot be made unless the board has consulted the council—assuming they did not originate from the council—a recognised trade union and other bodies that the university considers appropriate. The explicit requirement to consult the trade unions was passed as an amendment in the other place and reflects the university’s commitment to ensuring proper consultation with all stakeholders.

I should emphasise again that all the member institutions were consulted on the Bill and have unanimously endorsed the proposal to legislate. As under the 1994 Act, the board does not have the final say. Reflecting existing arrangements, the Bill provides that the statutes will not be effective until approved by the Privy Council. The Privy Council’s remit over the approval of university constitutional arrangements was restricted under the Higher Education and Research Act 2017. Once section 56 of that Act comes into force, English universities established other than by royal charter—those limited by guarantee—will no longer be required to seek Privy Council approval for amendments to their governing documentation. If the requirement for such approval to amendments of statutes of chartered universities is also ended, clause 4(2) of the Bill allows for the alignment of that.

That, in essence, is the main reason for the streamlining of statutes and the ability of member institutions to call themselves universities in their own right. I hope very much that the House will support this important but, as I have said, hopefully uncontroversial legislation.

5.49 pm

Gordon Marsden (Blackpool South) (Lab): I thank my hon. Friend the Member for Westminster North (Ms Buck), who I gather is, according to the nomenclature, the promoter of the Bill. She cut through the thicket of a highly technical and somewhat convoluted selection of arguments with a crisp and concise message—the Minister has just echoed it—which is that at the moment, in technical and practical terms, there are significant concerns for the colleges concerned that, to use the old adage, they are neither fish nor fowl. For all the reasons that my hon. Friend set out and the Minister reiterated at a time when it is so important that the international reputation of our existing universities and institutions is understood and held in high esteem, especially given
the situation in which we find ourselves with Brexit and other challenges from competitor countries with universities, our institutions must not be hampered or impeded with regard to the way in which they are understood by people not just in this place or even in this country, but internationally. That is an important part of the process.

I want first to declare a triple interest, albeit an historical one, in this debate. First, I am a former postgraduate of London University—from the Warburg Institute—which serves as a reminder that the University of London consists of not only colleges, but a number of separate institutions and institutes, many of which found themselves in quite a difficult position in the 1990s and 2000s when the changes that we know about began to take place in the relationship of the central university and the colleges. Secondly, of course, this took place some time ago, and, thirdly, to illustrate that, in the 1990s I was a member, by virtue of my editing the magazine *History Today*, of the board of the Institute of Historical Research. At that time, the debate about the relationship of the university to the various colleges, and what would happen to the university and its institutions, was a strong and fevered one. Thankfully, in the years since there has been a coexistence— I suppose that that would be the word— between the central register of the university and the colleges, and that coexistence has brought about the uncontroversial Bill before us today.

I do not want to repeat the points made by my hon. Friend and the Minister about the technicalities of the Bill and the processes, but I do want to make one or two observations about the 1994 Act and where this new settlement might take us. In the promoter’s statement of support for the Bill’s Second Reading, we are told:

“The current arrangements are...unnecessarily cumbersome. The 1994 Act allows consultees 4 months in which to make representations”,

and

“if the governing body wishes to take forward its proposals, it must pass two resolutions with an interval of at least one month.”

That is all very true, but I believe that it has a broader relevance than simply today’s technical debate, as it puts the onus on all the member institutions, when they are changing elements of their statute in the way my hon. Friend has explained will happen under the new set-up, to consult strongly with all their workforce—all their academic staff and students. The Minister will be well aware of the Opposition’s concerns in this area in the light of all we said in the debates on the Higher Education and Research Bill with his predecessor, and the various exchanges that he and I have had about this area since.

The importance of giving the colleges university status cannot be overstated, and I understand the concern of all hon. Members and those involved with the colleges that they should not be hampered externally. The hon. Member for Henley (John Howell), citing his role as a Government envoy to Nigeria, was worried about this, which I can understand, but in defence of the central functions of the University of London, I would like to reassure him that the status of the university as a brand is still very strong internationally. I pray in aid of that argument the tens of thousands of graduate students whom I see every year at the enormous graduation ceremonies, which are often presided over by Her Royal Highness Princess Anne, the chancellor of the University of London. I do not think we should entirely set aside the brand value, if I can put it that way, of the University of London.

Clause 3 of the Bill refers to conferring a general power on the university’s governing body—the board of trustees. The Bill was amended in the House of Lords, and I have taken the time to look at the evidence given to my noble Friend Lord McFall over two sessions in February and March this year, which was very interesting. In putting forward its proposals, the university made a number of claims about the existing process being unnecessarily cumbersome and protracted and the need to refresh its status in a more dynamic way. I pay tribute to the diligence of my noble Friend, because he pressed the university quite hard on the relationship between the university and the colleges. In particular, he was concerned that there should not be a sense of mission creep regarding to what needs to be done to establish that relationship. As a result of my noble Friend’s probing, two amendments were tabled, one of which restored the right of the trade unions at the colleges and the university to be consulted—[Interruption.]

Bob Stewart: I am hoping that the hon. Gentleman can have a short break to get his cough under control. I should like to ask him, and indeed the Minister, how much these changes are going to cost. Has there been a cost analysis of the changes?

Gordon Marsden: That is a good point. I do not have the answer to the hon. Gentleman’s question, but the Minister might be able to give him an indication. I would simply say that it is important that these processes are taken forward as economically and speedily as possible, which will obviously involve some degree of expense. I hope that no one would wish to see flights of enthusiasm for spending lots of money to promote new titles and logos, for example, especially at this time. That is not the official Opposition’s view; it is just my personal opinion.

I shall return to the question of amendments having to go out for consultation by recognised trade unions. This needs to be widely and substantially understood, particularly by the heads of the colleges and particularly in relation to the two unions involved—the University and College Union and Unison. It is important that the workforce should be involved in the process.

The second change relates to the Privy Council, and I understand the need for that change. As a general principle, however, we remain sceptical about the diminution of the role of the Privy Council in the position of universities. Members of the other place made that point when the Bill was going through. This goes back to the old Bagehot definition of the monarchy: it is not the powers that it confers, but the powers it denies. The Privy Council has historically been a useful backstop against the flights of fancy of higher education administrators, and I will be sorry to see its role entirely extinguished. That said, I understand the reasons given in the Bill.

Sir Christopher Chope: I am with the hon. Gentleman on that. When evidence was given to the other place, every time there was a challenge that these new powers could be abused, the defence was that, ultimately, there was the safeguard that approval would need to be given by the Privy Council, yet clause 4 envisages a time when the Privy Council will no longer be able to exercise its power.
Gordon Marsden: I thank the hon. Gentleman for his intervention. I do not want to prolong the debate unduly on this subject, but the Minister will have heard what the hon. Gentleman said and my generic misgivings, which are not specific to the particular issue in the Bill. We remain not entirely persuaded that there is not a role for the Privy Council.

In paying tribute to my noble Friend Lord McFall, I repeat some of the things that he said in persuading the university to restore these points:

"the focus should be on what values our society expects to see reflected in our universities; it is not just value for money”—important though that is. He continued:

"In that context, I am very pleased that there will be the opportunity for the widest consultation on this Bill”—I believe that that has been the case—"so that it is transparent and we can see exactly what universities will be.”

Finally, I have a warning with wider relevance not just for the University of London but for the Government and other universities. The promoter’s agent, writing to the House of Lords Clerk on 27 February 2018 after the Lords Deputy Speaker had requested evidence that member institutions and trade unions were aware of the couple of procedural changes in the Bill, stated:

“We did not specifically draw the Member Institutions’ and trade unions’ attention to the effect of the Bill in reducing the size of the quorum”—that would, of course, have made it a lot easier for the board of trustees to make alterations in statute without consultation—"since it was not a matter we thought it necessary to highlight in the way that it was framed”. I hope that I am not being unkind, but I detect a slight degree of administrative arrogance in the idea that people who are intimately involved, day by day, with the activities of the university should not be consulted. That way madness and disconnection lies. That said, we support this necessary and proportionate Bill.

6.3 pm

Rachel Maclean (Redditch) (Con): I will be brief. I merely wish to thank the hon. Member for Westminster North (Ms Buck) for her opening remarks and for explaining the need for this Bill. She gave a good account.

I support the Bill. In this country, we are rightly proud of our universities, which are a symbol of our soft power that attract people from all over the world. As both the shadow Minister and the hon. Gentleman said, and my generic misgivings, which are not specific to the particular issue in the Bill. We remain not entirely persuaded that there is not a role for the Privy Council.

The Bill has attracted support from both sides of the House, and I look forward to seeing it complete its passage.

6.4 pm

Sir Christopher Chope (Christchurch) (Con): This debate would not have taken place had I not blocked this Bill going through on the nod on Second Reading, and the contributions we have had today show that it has been a worthwhile exercise. I do not believe Bills should go through this House without being discussed, particularly when they are opaque. When the Bill was being debated in the other place, it was conceded that the foremost reason and key rationale for it was that it would facilitate universities becoming universities in their own right in London, and it was conceded that that was not clear in the Bill. If something is not clear in the Bill, how are we going to get to the bottom of it unless we start debating it? That is where the value of what we are doing this evening lies.

At the moment, there are 18 self-governing institutions within the University of London’s federal structure, a lot of which are, in many respects, regarded as universities in their own right. For example, if one looks at the 2019 university league tables, one sees that the London School of Economics is third, University College London, of which my late father was a graduate, getting first-class honours in Latin, is 10th—

Bob Stewart: Better than you then.

Sir Christopher Chope: Far better than me. King’s College London is 26th, Royal Holloway is 28th, Queen Mary is 38th, the School of Oriental and African Studies is 46th, St George’s is 52nd, Goldsmiths is 62nd and City, which has recently joined the University of London, is 66th. The college to which my hon. Friend referred, Birbeck, is 125th. We are told that other colleges, beyond the ones I have mentioned, are aspiring to become universities in their own right. They may include the Royal Central School of Speech and Drama, which this league table puts top of the arts and drama institutions. The question I would like to ask is this: what is going to happen to the other colleges within the federation of the University of London? They are probably not going to be in a position to become universities in their own right, and may not even aspire to do so. What is going to be done to protect their position? Obviously, they operate on the basis that they are part of the University of London, with all the prestige that that brings to their activities. A number of the 24 Russell Group universities are in fact colleges of the University of London—King’s College, LSE, Queen Mary and University College. A lot of these colleges are already seen as universities in their own right, so is it really going to make an enormous difference when this Bill is enacted? I am not so sure about that.

I was disappointed that the Minister did not address one of the hot topics of the moment, which is grade inflation. To what extent are these 12 new universities, instantly created as a result of this legislation, going to engage in grade inflation? A report was produced by Reform, and Tom Richmond, the senior research fellow who was its author, has said:

“Rocketing degree grade inflation is in no one’s interest.”

It continued:

“Universities may think easier degrees are a way to attract students but eventually they will lose currency and students will go elsewhere, even overseas.”

It went on to say:

“Restoring the currency of degrees would also mean better value for money for the £18 billion that universities receive each year in tuition fees.”

That report recommended that universities are stripped of their powers to award degrees and that final-year students should instead sit new national assessments for each degree course. The Bill will do quite the reverse by increasing the number of organisations that will be able to award degrees, with the perverse incentive that they
will want to be able to make their degrees easier and engage in the grade inflation about which so many people are concerned. I am interested to hear the Minister's response to that point.

**Mr Gyimah:** I thank my hon. Friend for pursuing this line of argument but suggest that he is making several leaps in his assumptions. The receiving of the university title, and in this case correcting an anomaly, do not in themselves entail the university lowering its standards. University standards are incredibly important, not only for new universities but for existing universities—indeed, for all universities. We can do a lot using the quality bodies, such as the Quality Assurance Agency for Higher Education, to ensure that the problem of grade inflation to which my hon. Friend refers is dealt with, but grade inflation is not an argument against an institution gaining the university title when it does exactly the same work as another institution that has that title.

**Sir Christopher Chope:** I am grateful to the Minister for responding to my point with that long intervention. I shall not engage in a long argument about it, but he is talking about all 18 colleges of the University of London being able to become universities in their own right. Why are they going to want to do that? Currently, the collegiate council can deal with issues relating to grade inflation within the University of London. I am surprised that my hon. Friend does not think that that is an important issue with which the council should be able to deal. In itself, the creation of a new university obviously does not mean that it will indulge in grade inflation, but when a report has been produced that suggests that fewer, rather than more, universities should award degrees, the Bill seems to me to be going in the wrong direction.

**Mr Gyimah:** I remind the House that we are not talking about institutions that just arrived yesterday. All these colleges have already demonstrated fully, in practice, that they are compliant with the financial sustainability, management and governance requirements that apply to all directly funded higher education institutions. My hon. Friend should keep that in mind when he comments on these institutions and whether they may or may not indulge in grade inflation or should have the title of university.

**Sir Christopher Chope:** Obviously I always take such things into account, but my hon. Friend has not actually told me what the Government are doing to counter grade inflation in universities. From what he has said, it seems implicit that he regards it as a serious problem. If he wishes to intervene again, I would be grateful if he told me what he is going to do about it.

**Mr Gyimah:** I am trying not to be drawn into that particular issue because it is not germane to this debate, but a significant piece of work is currently being done on quality in higher education, looking into grade inflation, unconditional offers, the quality of teaching and value for money in degrees. All are important to ensure that we safeguard our world-class university system, but I have not dwelt on that because it is not the subject of the debate.

**Sir Christopher Chope:** It may not be the subject of the debate, but it would be very much a pertinent subject for each college that wishes to acquire university status in its own right.

Before I finish, let me refer to clause 4(2), which enables the disengagement of the Privy Council from having to approve what comes out of the collegiate council's consultation process. It seems to me that what was said in the other place—I referred to it in an intervention—was absolutely germane. We are talking about relaxing the control of the governing body over what happens within the University of London federation. If the safeguard against abuse of that relaxed control is the involvement of the Privy Council, why does the Bill also legislate to do away with that? Privy Council involvement? It would be helpful if the answer to that was available now.

We could perhaps also be told at some stage to what extent the Privy Council's engagement in this process over the years has resulted in changes to processes that would otherwise have taken place without the approval of the Privy Council. Has the Privy Council's involvement been a pointless exercise, or has it brought pressure to bear to ensure that the only changes carried through are those that are sensible and in the best interests of all 18 members of the University of London's federal structure?

I fear that colleges in the University of London not becoming universities in their own right will have the consequence of putting tremendous pressure on the other colleges, which may be to their detriment. However, I have to accept that, so far, they do not seem to have complained about it, so all one can do in such a debate is to raise the issue and see what flows from it.

The Bill will now obviously go to an Unopposed Bill Committee, because there are no petitions against it. In recent Unopposed Bill Committees, pertinent questions have quite often been asked about private Bills. I hope that that process will be gone through again, and that, if the Bill needs to be amended in any way, that process will not be avoided but will be facilitated as a result of today's debate.

**Question put and agreed to.**

**Bill accordingly read a Second time and committed.**
Kevin Foster: This debate marks the end of a detailed process of parliamentary scrutiny of the Bill, which has both been welcome and led to significant changes and improvements to it. That process has been followed tenaciously by my hon. Friend the Member for Christchurch (Sir Christopher Chope), who is in his place today and who I am sure will again give us the benefit of his thoughts on their lordships' amendments. It must be said that the Bill is better for the scrutiny it has had in both Houses, with its Opposed Bill Committee in the other place having been chaired by Lord Thomas of Cwmgiedd, a former Lord Chief Justice.

Today’s debate focuses on the 20 amendments made by their lordships, resulting from the concerns raised in the Opposed Bill Committee, further to refine the Bill to ensure that its purpose is clear, that the powers it grants are proportionate and that the needs of all users of the Middle Level, including those who rely on it for drainage and for whom it is their home—that has been a particular issue of debate throughout the process—are properly considered. I have spoken at length with the promoters, and they support the Lords amendments and urge Members to accept them.

To give a brief history of the Bill for those who have perhaps not followed it quite as closely as I have had the pleasure of doing, it was originally introduced to the House in November 2016 and had its First Reading on 24 January 2017. It was debated on Second Reading on 29 March 2017, when my hon. Friend the Member for Christchurch and I had the opportunity to debate it at some length. A motion to revive the Bill in the new Session of Parliament followed the general election and was agreed by this House on 17 October 2017, and the House of Lords agreed to the revival of the Bill on 25 October 2017. The Bill went before an Opposed Bill Committee of the House of Commons on 15 to 17 January 2018, and consideration of the Bill as amended in Committee took place in this Chamber on 28 February. On Third Reading, the Bill passed without a Division.

My gratitude goes to my hon. Friend the Member for Solihull (Julian Knight)—sadly, he is not able to join us for this debate—who chaired the Opposed Bill Committee of this House and made some valuable contributions. In fact, my hon. Friend the Member for Christchurch highlighted on Third Reading how valuable it had been to hear on Report the contribution of the Chairman of the Opposed Bill Committee, as it meant that we could further explore some of the issues that had been presented there.

The passage of the Bill in the other place has been slightly quicker, as there was no intervening general election to cause an issue with its consideration. Its formal First Reading in the other place took place on 1 March this year and its formal Second Reading on Thursday 22 March. It was then considered for five days in June by an Opposed Bill Committee, chaired by the eminent jurist Lord Thomas of Cwmgiedd. He and the Committee brought a good level of scrutiny to it, ensuring that we have a very good Bill. I think that we can have every confidence in agreeing with their lordships today and then seeing this legislation enacted.

My understanding is that the Committee in the other place heard evidence from four of the seven petitioners against the Bill. Two of the petitioners had withdrawn their petitions and one was held not to have a right to be heard by the Committee, although I understand from speaking to the agents of the promoters that that person was still able to speak by providing evidence on behalf of one of the petitioners. To be clear, everyone has had a strong chance to put their views. Three of the petitioners had also appeared before the Opposed Bill Committee of this House.

The Middle Level Commissioners proposed amendments to the Bill in response to the concerns raised by the petitioners and members of the Committee. They also gave the Committee a number of undertakings that are not part of the Bill. However, I will turn to them in a few moments, because Members may find it helpful to know the reasons behind some of the undertakings given, as well as the reasons why they were given as formal undertakings to the Committee rather than incorporated as amendments to the Bill.

The amended Bill received formal Third Reading in the other place on 12 September this year, and we are now here to consider the Lords amendments. The promoter considers that the amendments do not extend or materially change the substance of the proposals in the Bill as earlier passed by this House, but they do provide some advantages.

Lords amendment 1 addresses a concern regarding small unpowered pleasure vessels. People may wonder what on earth that might mean. The amendment provides that vessels such as canoes and kayaks should not be included in the charging regime introduced by the Bill. However, when I speak about one of the other Lords amendments, I will explain that there may be a reasonable way—comparable with a similar system used on other waterways—to seek a contribution from those using the waterway for such purposes towards the costs of maintaining the waterway for navigation. This amendment is part of ensuring that the Bill is proportionate, and—to be blunt—to ensure that someone using a canoe or kayak does not find themselves being charged as if they were putting a pleasure boat down the waterway. It speaks to the socially inclusive nature of the use of the Middle Level; it is not just about those with large motor boats or significant amounts of money.

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs (Thérèse Coffey): I am very conscious of what my hon. Friend says, and we want to encourage people to be active in their recreation. Have the commissioners considered a case whereby such vessels may be part of a commercial operation, with kayaks
being rented out or training taking place? Have they recognised that the Lords would not want such cases to be covered by this provision?

Kevin Foster: I thank the Minister for her intervention. Yes, that is partly why Lords amendment 7 allows an ability to provide some charge for a more commercial operation. It could perhaps be a block charge to British Canoeing for those who are using the waterway, so that people pay a membership fee to British Canoeing before they are able to use particular waterways rather than paying individual fees to each individual operation. I see some nodding from those in the Under-Gallery. It is about trying to avoid a situation where a person with a canoe finds themselves having to register as a boat user to get on the water and pay a fee as if they were a large operation. They will not be completely barred, but they will be in a different charging regime from the standard one for the major pleasure boats and crafts using the waterway.

As the Minister will be aware, the current system of regulation means that fairly large pleasure and commercial boats can use the Middle Level with absolutely no regulation means that fairly large pleasure and commercial boats can use the waterway.

The general intention of the Lords amendment is to recognise that the Middle Level is a key part of the local community. Many use it informally. Although we need to bring in a form of safety regulation, it is not intended to bring that into the main scheme, although, as on other waterways, there might be a requirement to be a member of a recognised organisation that then contributes to the upkeep of safety equipment and other areas. There would then not necessarily be an additional charge to go on the Middle Level.

Lords Amendments 2, 3 and 4 deal with some of the issues that were raised on the membership of the navigation advisory committee and how it would work. Lords Amendment 2 would be familiar to anyone who has served on a local authority, with the idea that one should declare any personal interest or any matters that would be relevant to one's decisions. Some of the petitioners raised a concern that the navigation advisory committee must fairly represent the users. In essence—the promoters may not thank me for saying this—it should not be the case that, for example, the commissioners' mates or one particular group end up finding themselves on the navigation advisory committee.

However, the promoters were happy to accept the idea that relevant interests should be declared and that there should be clear processes for how that works. I do not think that any of us would see it as unreasonable that someone appointed to a representative body should declare to those they are representing what potential interests they may have that are relevant to their position on, in this case, the navigation advisory committee. They would not have to give a life story of their entire business affairs, but they would certainly have to declare anything that was relevant to their being on that committee—for example, what their interest is in the Middle Level, what they are doing there and how their business might operate. Those using the waterway for navigation could then satisfy themselves that there was a broad range of people represented there.

Bob Stewart (Beckenham) (Con): Could I be quite clear about this, because I am slightly worried? There is no question, is there, of a family taking a canoe out having to pay when they go on these waterways? That would seem excessive.

Kevin Foster: I thank my hon. and gallant Friend for his intervention. The Lords amendment that I have just briefly covered is designed to deal with some of those concerns. It would be quite common on other waterways to have a system whereby if someone was a member of the British Canoeing Society, that membership fee would cover the cost. The commissioners may also put in place some restrictions regarding, for example, children wearing life vests. I think most of us would feel that that would be a sensible form of regulation on the waterway.

Lords amendment 3 requires the commissioners to consult the committee on “proposals for a protocol for the removal of vessels under section 15.” As a consequence of the amendment, a similar consultation duty in clause 15 has been removed. The removal of boats is one of the most sensitive parts of the proposals, because some people are using the waterways as a home, and others have been using them for a long time, but I think all of us in the House accept that that power must be there. In these amendments, their lordships have struck the correct balance given the need to ensure safety, an effective navigation system, that the waterway is not blocked and that modern safety regulations are adhered to.

Amendment 4 is a very reasonable proposition from their lordships about what the dispute resolution process should be if the commissioners and the navigation advisory committee cannot agree on a matter. That process is set out in some detail, but for the purposes of time, I do not propose to go through each nuance. The fact that their lordships, and in particular the Chairman of the Opposed Bill Committee in the other place, felt that this was the right approach speaks volumes for why we should accept the amendment.

Lords amendment 5 relates to the continuity of navigation functions. A number of petitioners raised concerns in the Opposed Bill Committee in the other place that the Bill did not include specific maintenance duties for commissioners. The commissioners' view was that such duties were already imposed by the existing legislation that applies to the Middle Level—for instance, requiring them to maintain particular water levels in particular waterways. Clearly, for a waterway to be navigable, there needs to be a minimum draught, to guarantee that a boat can be taken along it.

Amendment 5 provides additional reassurance to navigation users that the Bill, once it becomes an Act, will not remove the requirement for the commissioners to exercise their current navigation functions under the existing Middle Level Acts. If the Bill had not been amended in this way, my clear instruction from the promoters is that the commissioners would have looked to ensure that places were navigable. After all, if a charging system is being introduced, the waterway has to be navigable if there is to be any income. They were
happy to suggest this amendment, and their lordships have made it to the Bill. Given that much of our debate, certainly on Second Reading, has been about the fact that much of the legislation around the Middle Level is incredibly elderly, it seems sensible to make clear in this modern piece of legislation that we still expect to see those standards followed. The amendment clarifies that point.

Lords amendment 6 clarifies a point about navigation income and how it relates to navigation expenditure. A number of petitioners raised concerns about the Bill’s potential unintended consequence of obliging the commissioners to aim to secure that navigation income met navigation costs, which could make the charges higher—for example, if there were a small number of users, the commissioners might be obliged to instantly bill them the full cost. A new provision is therefore added to clause 4 to confirm that the commissioners are not required to aim to secure that the income from charges meets the annualised navigation costs they incur.

In practice, the commissioners do not expect navigation income to be likely to meet navigation costs unless the current levels increase significantly. This reform is not just about an exciting couple of debates for me in the Chamber; the point is to make a real difference on the ground. They hope that that difference will be to see more people looking to use and navigate the waterways, but they do not necessarily want that tight constraint, which might mean that in the first instance a small number of people are suddenly hit with a large bill.

Lords amendment 7, which I briefly referred to in my response to the Minister’s intervention, provides that the use of small unpowered pleasure vessels on the waterway will not incur a charge unless it is agreed by the navigation advisory committee or a person appointed to act as an expert under the new dispute resolution process in clause 3. The amendment was made in response to concerns that users of small pleasure vessels such as canoes and kayaks should not be included in the regime introduced by the Bill—a position I fully support. As I outlined earlier, it makes eminent sense that they should not be in the standard charging regime, but, to touch on the Minister’s point, it was felt that there was still a need to recover some of the navigation expenses from those using the waterways in this manner, while allowing the public to use and enjoy them.

As I have said in response to interventions, particularly that of my hon. and gallant Friend the Member for Beckenham (Bob Stewart), the commissioners say that if they are likely to exercise the power, they will recover the charges in a block charge to British Canoeing, whose membership fee covers charges for other waterways. I have to make it clear that there would be a process of negotiation with British Canoeing, but I cannot see any reason why, in principle, there would not be a readiness on the part of the commissioners and British Canoeing to look at a way of making the Middle Level a more enjoyable place and, through providing specific facilities, a safer place for canoeing, and one that would again show that the waterway is socially inclusive.

Amendment 8 relates to clause 9 on stranded, grounded and sunken vessels and vehicles. The clause has been amended by their lordships to make it clear that the new powers to remove stranded, grounded and sunken vessels from the waterways do not prevent the commissioners from using existing powers to remove vessels from the waterways where that is more appropriate. The amendment is in response to petitioners’ concerns that vessels could be removed when moving them to a different location on the waterways would be a more appropriate solution. The new wording provides an appropriate balance between protecting the interests of the owners of stranded, grounded and sunken vessels and the commissioners’ duty to keep the waterways clear. It is also consistent with changes made by the House of Commons Opposed Private Bill Committee, which required the removal of vessels to be used as a last resort. I am conscious that there is a particular issue in relation to those who use a vessel as their residence. They will rightly want more protection than will those who have concerns about a pleasure craft that they only use for such a purpose.

Amendment 9 makes a minor change in relation to the confirmation of byelaws. I do not intend to talk about it, but I am only too happy to respond to interventions or further comments from colleagues present for this debate. The same applies to Lords amendments 10 to 12, which relate to the requirement for registration. We have debated some of these issues at length, and the amendments were included to reassure petitioners that if the commissioners refuse to register a vessel, the owner has the same opportunity to make representations and appeal against the decision as if the commissioners proposed to revoke an existing registration. That right was implicit in the Bill as previously drafted, but the amended wording makes it explicit.

The other Lords amendments are slightly more technical or set out other matters of interest. I will briefly highlight amendments Lords 14 to 16, which relate to how someone with a relevant interest in the Middle Level could, for example, challenge the accounts in the way a local government elector can in relation to their local council.

Kevin Foster: I thank my hon. Friend for his interest. The amendment responds directly to concerns raised by petitioners in the Lords Committee about how the commissioners would not be sufficiently accountable to navigation interests. It gives boat owners on the Middle Level the same right to scrutinise the commissioners’ navigation accounts, and to challenge them if necessary, that local government electors have in relation to local authorities. In effect, boat owners using the Middle Level can act in the same way as a local government elector. I hope that answers my hon. Friend’s question.

Lords amendments 18 to 20 are more technical in nature, and I do not intend to talk about them unless Members have a particular query. A number of undertakings have been provided, and I can certainly make them available to Members who wish to see them in more depth. I would flag up the third undertaking given in relation to the advertisement of byelaws. In effect, an undertaking has been given to advertise byelaws in the same way as traffic orders—for example, in the local newspaper or, in this instance, in a magazine of interest to boaters. That is not in the Bill because, as many of us would accept, 40 or 50 years ago the local newspaper was the obvious place to go to for relevant news and information. If we begin to codify that in legislation, it could become out of date.
A specific undertaking is given on the registration fee for static houseboats and the publication of the removal protocol. That is a particular issue, and it will be treated as if it were a byelaw. The final issue of note is the undertaking to return to a residential mooring strategy and looking at how we could use the Middle Level to provide more opportunities for residential use, but that is an undertaking to try, rather than a statutory "must", because ultimately the mooring facilities are determined by the local council.

The Bill has returned to the House in an excellent condition from the other place. We should accept the Lords amendments, as they strengthen the Bill and make it a measure that the whole House can accept.

Several hon. Members rose—

**Madam Deputy Speaker (Dame Eleanor Laing):** Order. For the sake of clarity, it might be useful for the House to know that it is perfectly in order for Members to speak on Lords amendments 2 to 20 as well as amendment 1, as they have been grouped. There is no real need for me to say that—I merely say it for the sake of clarity. The hon. Member for Torbay (Kevin Foster) has addressed amendments 2 to 20, and clearly I would have called him to order had that not been in order. He is rarely not in order. We are now debating Lords amendment 1, together with amendments 2 to 20.

**Luke Pollard** (Plymouth, Sutton and Devonport) (Lab/Co-op): I would like to thank the hon. Member for Torbay (Kevin Foster) for a full and detailed description of the Lords amendments. Although his constituency, and mine in Plymouth, are some distance from the geographical area in focus, the legislation has important consequences for that locality, so it is right that we give it due attention.

The Bill amends and updates the powers of the Middle Level Commissioners to regulate navigation on the Middle Level of the fens in Cambridgeshire and west Norfolk. The legislation that the Bill updates is over 150 years old, so the Bill brings the Middle Level into line with powers granted to the Environment Agency, the Canal & River Trust and the Broads Authority in Norfolk. The existing legislation dates from the 18th and 19th centuries, primarily the Middle Level Act 1862—who does not remember that gorgeous piece of legislation? The foreign policy mastermind, Henry John Temple, Third Viscount Palmerston, was in his second term as Prime Minister. A member of the now defunct Liberal party, he was grappling with the American civil war. Queen Victoria was on the throne. We had riots in Lancashire over the cotton recession. The new Westminster bridge opened in London, and criminal law was amended to make robbery with violence punishable by flogging. We remember that year well. Across the pond in 1862, Abraham Lincoln announced that he would issue an emancipation proclamation the following year—what a time to be alive. We had the Middle Level Act on top of that—indeed, our cup overfloweth.

Turning to the Bill, the Middle Level Commissioners provide flood defence and water level management to the Middle Level area and are the navigation authority for the Middle Level river system. I mention that, because many people will want to know what and where the Middle Level is. The Middle Level, the largest of the great levels of the fens, was reclaimed by drainage of the land in the 17th century, and consists of over 120 miles of watercourses, 100 miles of which are statutory watercourses. If it were not for the operations of the commissioners and the local internal drainage boards, much of that fenland would be under water as it is below sea level, which would have a devastating impact on the 100,000 people who live and work in the Middle Level area.

The chief executive of the 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 waterway, so it is important to update the laws, enabling them to have better control of the waterways that they seek to oversee and ensuring safe navigation, as the hon. Member for Torbay set out.

The amended Bill originally intended to allow the Middle Level Commissioners to charge vessels to use the waterways; fine people for staying longer than allowed at moorings; check that boats using the waterways have valid insurance; remove sunken or abandoned vessels; temporarily close sections of waterways for works, or for events; and enter into arrangements with other navigation authorities for the mutual recognition of registrations and licences—all good stuff, the House will agree. We know that the additional income for the commissioners could make a real difference to the fenlands and the waterways. The Bill will bring the legislation covering the Middle Level into the 21st century in line with other navigation authorities, as set out by the Bill’s sponsor in his remarks.

6.45 pm

With the amendments made in the other place, I am pleased that we are now at a point where we, or, more importantly, the vast majority of the citizens directly affected, are largely happy with the Bill. I understand that the commissioners have consulted widely and thoroughly with interested parties, the substantial majority of whom were in favour of the proposed changes. I am grateful in particular to the peers in the other place for editing the Bill and tabling amendments based on the concerns of petitioners.

I know that additional concerns were raised. Some people did not feel that the Bill, as it originally stood, took into account the views of barge travellers and boat dwellers in the area, especially those on low incomes. I believe that the very real and genuine concerns of local people, especially about the impact of the proposed legislation on the poorest in the Middle Level community, have been reviewed with a sympathetic ear. The Bill is now in a much better shape. Lord Hunt of Kings Heath, who was on the Committee, said: “it’s been improved and protects boat owners who use boats as their home and don’t have much money.”

The promoters should reflect on the fact that the interests of the poorest were left out of the original text.

I am pleased that there has been due scrutiny in the other place, whose new amendments, as set out by the hon. Member for Torbay, were made to build in safeguards for boat owners who are not very well off, live on boats permanently and were worried about evictions. The challenge will be how the powers in the Bill are used by the Middle Level Commissioners. I hope the concerns of the House about the impact of the Bill on those who live on boats, especially those on low incomes, will be remembered when powers are implemented and used.
fully. As the concerns of the Official Opposition have been taken into account in the amended Bill, we will not be opposing it today.

Sir Henry Bellingham (North West Norfolk) (Con): It is a pleasure to participate in this debate on this very important Bill. I would first like to pay tribute to my hon. Friend the Member for Torbay (Kevin Foster), who volunteered to take it on. It has required a lot of work and effort. I want to put on record that he has done a quite superb job, handling it with great expertise and enthusiasm. He has made really good progress with what is an important Bill. He would make a very good Minister and this is perhaps a trial run for when he takes his first Bill through Parliament.

I would also like to thank the hon. Member for Plymouth, Sutton and Devonport (Luke Pollard), who has been very supportive. In the process, he has become very knowledgeable about the Middle Levels and, indeed, about many watercourses that are so important to the Fens.

I will be brief, Madam Deputy Speaker. I wanted to put on record those two points, but also to say that I have a constituency interest. My constituency is right at the north-eastern end of the Middle Level, but it encompasses much of the constituency of my neighbours, my right hon. Friend the Member for South West Norfolk (Elizabeth Truss) and my hon. Friend the Member for North East Cambridgeshire (Stephen Barclay). I do have an interest and represent a significant number of constituents who enjoy using the Middle Level and associated waterways. To them, this is a way of life. It is an incredibly important part of their leisure activities, and there are many commercial activities involving boats and pleasure craft. The Bill is important to update the way the Middle Level in particular is controlled and managed.

I would like to put on record the excellent work done by the commissioners and the drainage boards. As the hon. Member for Plymouth, Sutton and Devonport pointed out, without the oversight of the Fens and without the management of the drainage systems in place—of which the Middle Level is obviously but one of a number—we would not have the incredibly successful farm land or all the other enterprises associated with food production and processing. As he also pointed out, a lot of houses are below sea level and simply would not continue to exist without this management in place. We should pay tribute and salute the people who do it, very often completely free of charge on a pro bono basis. In addition, many constituents enjoy using the Middle Level and associated waterways. To them, this is a way of life. It is an incredibly important part of their leisure activities, and there are many commercial activities involving boats and pleasure craft. The Bill is important to update the way the Middle Level in particular is controlled and managed.

To make one specific point, under the new regime it is important that boats that are occupied—where people live on the boats in question—are treated fairly and with a light touch. That is incredibly important, because as the hon. Member for Plymouth, Sutton and Devonport pointed out, many are on relatively low incomes. This is very often not a lifestyle choice, but a choice that has been forced on them. They have contributed a great deal over the years to the whole atmospheres of the waterways in the Fens and they should be respected and looked after properly.

I have looked at the amendments very carefully. I was very supportive of the Bill in the first place, but I shared the view of my hon. Friend the Member for Christchurch (Sir Christopher Chope), who is sitting behind me, that it could be improved. Well, it has been improved. All the amendments have been well thought out. They are well crafted and well drafted. We now have a Bill that is absolutely fit for purpose and that can become an Act of Parliament that endures. It is one that my hon. Friend the Member for Torbay can be very proud of, because it will serve my constituents very well in the future. I very much look forward to seeing its success in the years to come.

Sir Christopher Chope (Christchurch) (Con): Is it not good that we are having a debate about these amendments so that comments can be put on the record and people looking at the history of the Middle Level in future can say, “This is what these amendments were about.”? I am very grateful to my hon. Friend the Member for Torbay (Kevin Foster) for introducing and explaining them and putting that on the record, because otherwise this might have gone through on the nod.

My hon. Friend referred to the amendments in such detail, so I shall concentrate on one or two of the undertakings, because they are an equally important part of the process. The undertakings are contained in a letter dated 13 July to Lord Thomas, who was the Chair of the Opposed Bill Committee on the Middle Level Bill in the other place. I shall start with the first undertaking, which states that the commissioners undertake “to spend at least 25% of the annual income received from charges under section 5 on providing facilities on the Nene-Ouse Navigation Link which meet the current Minimum Standards for the Provision of Facilities for Boaters as published by the Inland Waterways Association, until the standards are achieved on this route; and will maintain those facilities until the Navigation Advisory Committee agrees that they are no longer needed (or an expert appointed to determine any dispute following the procedures set out in section 3 determines that they are no longer needed)”.

As you may recall, Madam Deputy Speaker, that issue was raised by Sir Christopher Chope, who is sitting behind me, that endures. It is one that my hon. Friend the Member for Christchurch is absolutely fit for purpose and that can become an Act crafted and well drafted. We now have a Bill that is amenable to amendments. The undertaking (5) on the level of charges for residential houseboats, which limits the charges for residential houseboats. Undertakings (7), (8), (9) and (10) relate to the residential mooring strategy, which, again, my hon. Friend referred to briefly. He was saying that it all depends on the local planning authority. I hope that it does not, because undertaking (7) says that the Middle Level Commissioners are undertaking “to prepare and publish a strategy setting out how they intend to exercise the powers conferred by section 15 with the aim of increasing the availability of residential moorings (including transit and temporary moorings) on the waterways”.

Undertaking (8) sets out “that the strategy will include details of the steps that the Commissioners will take to...identify potential residential mooring sites to be put to the local planning authority...facilitate applications for planning permission for residential moorings” and to “provide residential mooring themselves, subject to obtaining funding and planning permission”.

In undertaking (9), they undertake...
“in preparing the strategy, to consult the Navigation Advisory Committee…as well as the local planning authorities, and housing authorities”;

and in undertaking (10), they undertake
“to keep the strategy under review, and revise…as necessary”.

Those are much more proactive undertakings than one might have thought from my hon. Friend’s summary, and they point to one of the big concerns from the outset, which was that the people using the Middle Level for the purposes of residential occupation felt they could be priced out or discriminated against. The undertakings in the letter, however, which have been incorporated into the amendments, are a significant improvement on what was there originally.

I do not need to undertake an exercise of self-justification. I am pleased to have been able to pursue this debate on behalf of the petitioners, as I can now see the beneficial results.

Dr Thérèse Coffey: It is a great privilege to contribute to the later stages of the Bill.

I am conscious that the Bill has been promoted by the Middle Level Commissioners. I am sure they will recognise the importance that Parliament attaches to scrutinising draft legislation that was not part of any party’s election manifesto, and my hon. Friend the Member for Christchurch (Sir Christopher Chope) was absolutely right to ensure that the Bill got the level of scrutiny he gave it. There has been a good response from the other place as well.

I pay particular tribute to my hon. Friend the Member for Torbay (Kevin Foster). In my first Parliament, I took a private Member’s Bill through the House and on to the statute book. It was also on a topic affecting rivers and similar: the Wreck Removal Convention Act 2011. My hon. Friend the Member for Christchurch was key to ensuring my Bill made good progress, and he has done the same during the various stages of this Bill.

The Bill matters because, as my hon. Friend the Member for North West Norfolk (Sir Henry Bellingham) pointed out, this is a really important part of the country, stretching from the area around Bedford through to north-west Norfolk. A mixture of things happen on the Middle Levels that are critical to the future prosperity of that part of the country and for which it is important that people can access our canals. They are our blue lungs, running throughout the United Kingdom, but particularly the Middle Levels. It is appropriate that the amendments, while recognising the need for future investment to ensure that these activities continue, seek to ensure that people who enjoy them do so in a measured and considered way, and as my hon. Friend the Member for Torbay pointed out, there will be appropriate consultation on some of the changes.

I asked the question I did earlier partly to check that other users of the Middle Level would not be able to find a loophole for potential commercial activities simply on the basis of encouraging people into recreation.

My hon. Friend the Member for Torbay answered my question very fully, and as he said, there were nods of assent from the appropriate people in the Under Gallery—that is a habit he will have to get used to if he is ever called upon to be part of Her Majesty’s Government. As you will be aware Madam Deputy Speaker, Ministers regularly look towards the Box to check that they are saying the right thing—and of course they always are. I welcome the support of the hon. Member for Plymouth, Sutton and Devonport (Luke Pollard). It is right that draft legislation that is not about manifestos gets the appropriate scrutiny. I am particularly pleased that, through the amendments to clause 9, we have ensured that the new powers will not prevent any environmental impact, or indeed any navigational impact from, for instance, sunken vessels, from being dealt with immediately. As for matters such as navigation functions, I think that the House has been reassured, and I am sure that it will support the amendments—and the Bill—this evening.

Lords amendment 1 agreed to.
Lords amendments 2 to 20 agreed to.

Business without Debate

DELEGATED LEGISLATION

Madam Deputy Speaker (Dame Eleanor Laing): With the leave of the House, I propose to take motions 6 to 11 together.

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

INSURANCE

That the draft Third Parties (Rights Against Insurers) Act 2010 (Consequential Amendment of Companies Act 2006) Regulations 2018, which were laid before this House on 28 June, be approved.

ELECTRONIC COMMUNICATIONS

That the draft Data Retention and Acquisition Regulations 2018, which were laid before this House on 28 June, be approved.

EXITING THE EUROPEAN UNION

That the draft Medicines and Healthcare Products Regulatory Agency Trading Fund (Amendment) (EU Exit) Order 2018, which was laid before this House on 10 July, be approved.

That the draft Financial Regulators’ Powers (Technical Standards etc.) (Amendment etc.) (EU Exit) Regulations 2018, which were laid before this House on 16 July, be approved.

LOCAL GOVERNMENT

That the draft Greater Manchester Combined Authority (Adult Education Functions) Order 2018, which was laid before this House on 23 July, be approved.

That the draft West Midlands Combined Authority (Adult Education Functions) Order 2018, which was laid before this House on 23 July, be approved.—[Amanda Milling.]

Question agreed to.
Childhood Obesity

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

7.2 pm

Ms Nadine Dorries (Mid Bedfordshire) (Con): Let me first declare an interest: I am currently taking part in a television experiment relating to obesity.

The United Kingdom is now the third most obese nation in the world. That is a shocking fact, especially when, as we know, the second biggest preventable cause of cancer is obesity. This is a crisis, and as always when there is a crisis, the innocent victims are the children. The obesity crisis that is hitting the UK is no exception: the victims are the vulnerable, the poor and the children.

I pay tribute to Andy Cook, the director of the Centre for Social Justice. The work of that prestigious organisation does not receive the praise or recognition that it should. A report produced by the CSJ, “Off the Scales”, provides an in-depth analysis of the obesity crisis facing the UK and makes a series of recommendations that complement the Government’s own obesity strategy report of 2016. However, the difference between the two reports is fundamental.

The CSJ report takes a holistic, headline view that is workable and suggests pathways towards the measuring of deliverable outcomes and progress. It highlights the success of implementing a joined-up cross-organisational and cross-departmental strategy to solve a problem that is costing the taxpayer more than £30 billion a year, and, more importantly, costing the lives of a future generation. It highlights some of the weak areas in the Government’s childhood obesity plan, which was published by the Department of Health in August 2016 and aimed to reduce childhood obesity rates in England over the next 10 years. It is a good plan, but it has little chance of making any impactful difference, as there is little in the way of joined-up thinking or leadership, or accountability, on the part of individual Departments.

Let me explain, in the starkest terms possible, why this issue is so important. For the first time ever, one in four children of the next generation will die younger than their parents. Nearly a third of all children aged between two and 15 are overweight or obese, as the Government report itself highlights. Younger generations are becoming more obese at earlier ages, and obesity doubles the risk of dying prematurely, so this is an incredibly serious problem. I am not sure that many parents know that, but they should, and we should be doing more to make sure that they do.

Dr Caroline Johnson (Sleaford and North Hykeham) (Con): I congratulate my hon. Friend on securing this debate about something that is a massive issue in my constituency. I am a type 2 diabetic—it is interesting that she has referred to that—and I became a type 2 diabetic because of the horrendous food I ate and the lifestyle I had as a young person, until I became a diabetic. It is essential that we address with young people the age-old principle of all things in moderation. I supported the sugar tax and changes to the way in which nutritional information is displayed. Does the hon. Lady agree that while large steps have been taken, there is more to be done to tackle this? Funding must be allocated to allow charities and Sure Start to run programmes on nutrition to teach people cheap and efficient ways of eating healthy.

Ms Dorries: The hon. Gentleman nearly got a speech in there. As I said, I will go on to address funding issues.

The parents on whom this issue impacts the most, and who are most likely to be affected, are those who make the poorest nutritional choices. They do not take The Times, or spend time on the internet reading the news or visiting any other sites where information about the effects of obesity on their children is likely to be repeated. They are also the parents who live in areas of higher deprivation. The fast-food, junk-food giants place more of their outlets in such areas than in areas of affluence, which makes the temptation easier and the consequences more impactful.

What can we as a Government do? I want to praise the headteacher and staff at Shillington Lower School in my constituency. Every morning after assembly, every child joins in with 15 minutes of vigorous exercise. Some are outdoors, running around the field perimeter, while others are in the hall doing boot camp with the cyber coach. That is in addition to their normal PE lessons and physical activities. The school actively encourages walking to school, and I have to say that Shillington Lower School’s efforts are there to be seen, but that is one approach, in one school in one village.

I am doing my little bit by embarking on a tour of schools in my constituency, and I am speaking to public health officers at Central Bedfordshire Council to find out how much more we can do locally in my Mid Bedfordshire constituency. However, this piecemeal approach is part of the problem. We have local council initiatives, as well as individual schools, teachers, parents, elected Mayors, public health officers, social workers and health visitors all doing their own little bit, and while that is all incredibly worth while, no one knows what the other is doing. The approach is taken on the basis of good intentions, but it is far from being an effective plan to deliver any measurable results.

This issue should be a governmental and departmental priority, regardless of Brexit and the noises off. This crisis has nothing to do with Brexit and everything to do with the lives of our children, yet there is no plan that co-ordinates a national strategy to make dealing with this issue a priority, and there is zero leadership from the top—I am very sad to say that. A national
crisis requires leadership and a holistic, co-ordinated headline plan. Tackling this problem needs to be one of the Government’s top five priorities, and that needs to include funding.

The Minister is very much doing his bit, in line with the Government’s obesity plan. That is a great achievement, but sadly it is nowhere near enough to tackle the problem. The Minister is a good, conscientious and pragmatic man, and the father of healthy and very beautiful young children. I know that he personally is as worried about this as anyone else, but he is just one Minister in one Department, although I accept that his is the Department that should be leading on this, in accordance with the Government’s aims and objectives in this area. However, if we had some high-level leadership and direction, we could have all the Departments working together towards one strategy and working together as one taskforce to establish our short, medium and long-term goals to reduce the weight of the nation and in particular of our children.

In fact, the Minister is the only person who is accountable for tackling this national crisis. As “Off the Scales” highlights, there is little or no direct accountability among Departments for the childhood obesity plan, other than the Department of Health and Social Care and a small requirement on the Department for Education. What about the Ministry of Housing, Communities and Local Government? What about the Department for Digital, Culture, Media and Sport, given that sport is one of the biggest players in the fight against obesity? What about the Department for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs, the Department for Transport and the Treasury? We know that the Treasury is the place where all good ideas go to die, regardless of which party is in power, and it is not giving this national crisis serious consideration. So many people—from the wonderful staff at Shillington Lower School all the way up to the Department of Health and Social Care—are doing their own thing, but, sadly, none of this can be monitored or measured, because it is all entirely disjointed and unconnected.

The NHS has recently enjoyed a £20 billion cash injection. At present, only 0.2% of the NHS budget is allocated to Public Health England to deal with obesity and to put in place preventive strategies with regard to childhood obesity, yet the Government’s plan places huge responsibility on Public Health England to tackle this issue.

Dr Caroline Johnson: Does my hon. Friend agree that money spent on managing obesity is money well spent? In fact, the money that is invested in helping people to be more healthy will be recouped, because there will be less NHS spending on their ill health.

Ms Dorries: I think that my hon. Friend has seen my speech; my next point is that we are putting the cart before the horse.

There is a huge responsibility on Public Health England, yet it has only 0.2% of the NHS budget. The Government have reduced the public health budget by £600 million between 2015 and 2018 and increased the NHS budget for acute and hospital care. This complements my hon. Friend’s point, because they are pumping all that money into hospitals and acute care, but putting very little into strategies to prevent people from going into hospital in the first place. This imbalance in the NHS budget demonstrates how little attention and importance are being given to this crisis at the top of the Government by No. 10 and No. 11—particularly No. 11 and the Treasury.

As I said, the cart is being put before the horse. As a nation, we are allowing people to become ill. We are failing to prevent that from happening, but we are providing state-of-the-art hospitals and doctors in our amazing NHS to treat them. We should be placing our focus on preventing obesity, which is the second biggest preventable cause of cancer after smoking, and keeping people out of hospital.

Of all the nations that fund healthcare, we have one of the highest healthcare budgets in the world. We spend more each year on treating obesity and diabetes than we spend on our police, our fire service and our judicial system combined, yet we allocate only 0.2% of the NHS budget to Public Health England. When we cost out Public Health England and take out its accountable costs, we see that only a tiny fraction of that 0.2% is given over to obesity prevention and treatment in real terms. The chasm between prevention and treatment highlights the critical need for the Government to develop their approach to the delivery of public health services further and to ensure that prevention receives the investment it so desperately requires.

It is time for the Treasury to think forwards, not backwards, by reversing the reduction in councils’ public health budgets and providing local councils with the funding they need to tackle this problem head on. Local councils should be the major player in this strategy, yet they have seen their funding for public health services cut. They know their own demographics. They know the problems in their area, and they know how to deal with them. Local councils have already engaged as much as they can with this issue, and they are saving the lives of the next generation.

I cannot say it often enough or strongly enough: one in four children will die younger than their parents. If we lined up 50 parents and told them that figure, they would be shocked. Parents need to know that information.

How much of the new £20 billion that the Government are allocating to the NHS will be made available to Public Health England and, in turn, towards funding the Government’s childhood obesity plan of 2016? As much as people scream and shout that the NHS is being starved of funding, the truth is that the recently announced £20 billion, along with savings from the £20 billion Nicholson challenge, amounts to a £40 billion uplift to treat people who are taken to hospital with illnesses induced by obesity.

Given that Public Health England has been given responsibility for decreasing the proportion of children leaving primary school overweight over a 10-year period, why is so little of the NHS budget allocated for preventive medicine? What uplift was PHE given to address this childhood obesity crisis? How is it supposed to achieve the aims and objectives set out in the 2016 plan? Does the Minister not believe that there should be a cross-departmental strategy, devised by Ministers, to set out in detail what each Department will do to achieve pre-determined goals? If that is not the case, we should engage in a national information and media drive to warn parents of all the dangers of obesity. Allowing a child to become obese is almost as dangerous as putting cigarettes in their mouth.
I understand why the Department of Health and Social Care introduced a policy to cap the calories in various types of junk food, but it will not work—people will buy two. The voluntary sugar reduction targets in the 2016 plan have not been met by the main producers and providers of these foods.

Is it not time to introduce a mandatory approach? I am aware that the money raised by the sugar levy—I probably should have mentioned this earlier—is to be allocated to implementing some of the aims and objectives set out in the 2016 plan, and the Government’s approach is a welcome step, but where and to whom will that money go? Will it be allocated to local councils? Is it enough?

As we have seen with food producers that are not meeting the requirement to reduce sugar in food, will the same happen with the sugar levy? Will it actually make a difference? Will it give us the funding that we need to tackle this crisis? I would say not, because we are basing our plans on something subjective and unknown. We do not know how much the levy will raise. We do not know whether producers will reduce sugar in drinks and food. We do not know to what degree the sugar levy will work. As this is such a crisis, should we not be looking at more quantifiable measures?

Where will the money go? Is it not time to consider the recommendations of the Centre for Social Justice and develop a frontline approach? I cannot think of any Government policy on which all Departments work together and on which there is a non-political taskforce above the Departments run by an independent body to pull together policies from each Department to tackle an issue—that goes entirely against our culture—but that is what we need. Should we not work with companies that load food with sugar and set them mandatory goals, not voluntary goals, to reduce the amount of sugar over a period of time? Should we not introduce financial penalties? We have seen producers of products such as breakfast cereals do just that, but the problem is that it is not happening fast enough, it is not consistent and it is not equitable, because only some producers are doing it.

Only by adopting a long-term approach that is nationally led and locally driven, with the councils involved and heading it, that is overseen by an independent body outside the influence of party politics and that is championed by committed political, cross-party leaders will an effective childhood obesity plan ever be delivered. I do not want to chuck a bucket of cold fizzy drink over the Minister’s 2016 plan, because it is a great initiative and I agree with her that it is a good plan. It introduced bold, world-leading measures, such as the sugary drinks levy. I was in Argentina at the G20 earlier this month, giving a presentation about the work we are doing in this area. Many other countries around the world look to what is happening in England and are copying it. Since bringing in the levy, we have seen the equivalent of a staggering 45 million kg of sugar taken out of soft drinks through reformulation. As a result, hundreds of millions of pounds have been poured into improving opportunities for physical activity for children. My hon. Friend asked where the money was going—that is where it is going. It is going into the sport premium in schools. The Treasury has kindly agreed to double that sum. I will expand on the point about where it is being spent. She mentioned one example, but I have others.

We also challenged manufacturers to reduce the sugar content in some of the foods children eat most, and they responded. Tesco, Lucozade Ribena Suntory, Kellogg’s, whose people I met this afternoon, Waitrose and Nestlé are just some of the companies that deserve credit and providers of these foods, but it will not work—people will buy two. The voluntary sugar reduction targets in the 2016 plan have not been met by the main producers and providers of these foods.

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Dr Johnson: Will the Minister give way?

Steve Brine: Very briefly, because we do not have long.

Dr Johnson: I have a quick question: are these manufacturers of food and drinks products removing the sugar and making the products less sweet, or are they replacing the sugar with artificial sweeteners?

Steve Brine: They are doing both. As the representatives from Kellogg’s were at pains to say to me today, it is about healthy eating and quality taste. I passionately believe that that is true.
We were always clear that our 2016 plan was just the start of the conversation, and we are clear that more needs to be done. We always said that we reserve the right to do more, which is why in June this year we published chapter 2 of the child obesity plan. My hon. Friend the Member for Mid Bedfordshire asked whether there is a cross-departmental strategy; yes, chapter 2 is very much a cross-departmental strategy. It sets a bold ambition—what we like to think of as a north star—to halve child obesity and significantly reduce the gap in obesity between children from the most and least deprived areas by 2030. As with our initial plan, the new policies were informed by the latest research and emerging evidence, including from many debates in Parliament and various reports from key stakeholders. Those stakeholders include the Health and Social Care Committee and, yes, the Centre for Social Justice. In fact, the latter’s “Off the Scales” report is on my coffee table in the Department. It was the Centre for Social Justice that told me all about Amsterdam and it is because of it and its good work that I went to Amsterdam to see the work being done there.

Key measures in the next chapter include looking to address the heavy promotion and advertising of food and drink products high in fat, salt and sugar on television, online and in shops. Alongside that, we want to equip parents with the information that they need to make healthy and informed decisions about the food that they and their children eat when they are out and about.

My hon. Friend mentioned Brexit. Of course, there is never a debate in which we do not mention it, but there is a Brexit connection for this debate. One thing that campaigners call for is traffic-light labelling on the front of products. We are unable to do that while we are an EU member state, but once we are no longer, we will have new freedoms in that regard. I do not know whether that is what was meant by taking back control, but I put that on the record for the House.

I was pleased to hear of the efforts of Shillington Lower School in my hon. Friend’s constituency. Staff there are obviously doing all the right things to encourage children to take part in physical activity. I have seen great examples in my own constituency, most recently at Western Primary School, and I am sure that many other Members have seen good examples, too. Yes, it is about recognising that we need foods to be reformulated, but it is also very much about the importance of physical activity in tackling obesity. Yesterday, I opened a major physical activity and health conference across the way at the Queen Elizabeth II centre. It is going on all week and will consider the benefits of physical activity and health. As part of chapter 2, we are promoting a new national ambition for all primary schools to adopt the initiative of an active mile—or healthy mile; people call it different things.

I agree with my hon. Friend that achieving our ambition to reduce child obesity will require a concerted effort from many others, including families, schools and local authorities, which she mentioned. At the recent Local Government Association conference, I announced the trailblazer programme, which will work closely with local authorities to show what can be achieved and find solutions to barriers at a local level to address child obesity. I took great inspiration from what has been done in the city of Amsterdam. My hon. Friend is absolutely right that local authorities know their local areas best. By sharing ideas with each other—some very good things are going on—they can achieve the full potential of the powers and levers that they have. Many local authorities already have great powers and levers to change their areas. For instance, they have powers over junk-food advertising in the areas around schools. We want to see those powers used better.

As part of the second chapter, we have already launched the consultation on banning the sale of energy drinks to children—the message is clear: we do not think that they are appropriate for children—and the consultation on calorie labelling for food and drink served outside the home, or in the out-of-home setting, as they say. Later this year, we will launch consultations on restricting the promotion of fatty and sugary products by location and by price, and we will consult on further advertising restrictions, including a 9 pm watershed. That work is with the Department for Digital, Culture, Media and Sport, the sugary drinks levy—the sugar tax—work is with Her Majesty’s Treasury, and the trailblazer programme work is with the Ministry of Housing, Communities and Local Government, so I gently reject the idea that this is not a cross-Government strategy. These consultations are genuine and are open to everybody, and we welcome full and considered responses from across society and industry.

So far as the future is concerned, we continue to learn from the latest evidence; my hon. Friend mentioned evidence. The Policy Research Unit informs us all the time of new approaches from across the UK. We welcome the action taking place in Scotland, which is consulting on its own obesity plan at the moment. It is good to see that many of our ambitions align. As I said, I often talk to partners in other countries about work going on internationally—I have mentioned Amsterdam a couple of times—and about where we can learn from them and, possibly, where they can learn from us.

My hon. Friend is also right to mention the additional £20.5 billion a year for the NHS that will support the new long-term plan. I cannot pre-empt what the NHS will put into the plan—the Prime Minister set NHS England the challenge of writing it—but we have been clear from the outset, and the new Secretary of State has been clear, that prevention should be a key part.

Our ambition is bold but simple. We have a lot to gain by reducing obesity, and we have an awful lot to lose. We believe that the hard, evidence-based actions that we propose will encourage healthier choices and will make those choices more readily available and identifiable to parents. Taken together, we are confident that those actions will have a real impact on child obesity. We will continue to monitor progress and emerging evidence. As we have always said, this is not the end of the conversation. We watch things like a hawk.

Finally, I reiterate my thanks to my hon. Friend for securing the debate, and to you, Madam Deputy Speaker, for facilitating it.

Question put and agreed to.

7.31 pm

House adjourned.
The House met at half-past Eleven o’clock

PRAYERS

[Mr Speaker in the Chair]

Oral Answers to Questions

SCOTLAND

The Secretary of State was asked—

Leaving the EU: Devolution

1. Brendan O’Hara (Argyll and Bute) (SNP): What discussions he has had with the Scottish Government on the devolution of powers to the Scottish Parliament upon the UK leaving the EU. [907020]

3. Patrick Grady (Glasgow North) (SNP): What discussions he has had with the Scottish Government on the devolution of powers to the Scottish Parliament upon the UK leaving the EU. [907022]

6. Gavin Newlands (Paisley and Renfrewshire North) (SNP): What discussions he has had with the Scottish Government on the devolution of powers to the Scottish Parliament upon the UK leaving the EU. [907025]

9. Mhairi Black (Paisley and Renfrewshire South) (SNP): What discussions he has had with the Scottish Government on the devolution of powers to the Scottish Parliament upon the UK leaving the EU. [907028]

12. Kirsty Blackman (Aberdeen North) (SNP): What discussions he has had with the Scottish Government on the devolution of powers to the Scottish Parliament upon the UK leaving the EU. [907031]

13. Chris Stephens (Glasgow South West) (SNP): What discussions he has had with the Scottish Government on the devolution of powers to the Scottish Parliament upon the UK leaving the EU. [907032]

The Secretary of State for Scotland (David Mundell): The European Union (Withdrawal) Act 2018 confirmed that, where EU law intersects with devolved competence, those powers will flow directly to the devolved Administrations on exit day. This means that over 100 powers will go directly to the Scottish Parliament. We are also continuing to make progress in establishing common frameworks, which the Joint Ministerial Committee (EU Negotiations) discussed last week.

Brendan O’Hara: The Secretary of State is turning a blind eye to the depopulation crisis facing rural Scotland. His Government’s refusal even to consider devolving immigration powers to the Scottish Parliament will cause further damage to these fragile communities. Will he explain to the people and businesses in my constituency how ending freedom of movement will help to solve that depopulation crisis?

David Mundell: The Smith commission, which was supported by the Scottish National party at the time, determined that immigration would not be devolved to the Scottish Parliament. I am acutely aware of issues surrounding depopulation and the demographic challenges. Indeed, I heard them mentioned directly in the hon. Gentleman’s constituency. Migration is one part of the issue but, as I heard in his constituency, matters such as transport and housing are another part.

Patrick Grady: Is it not in fact the case that, by reappropriating powers to this Parliament without them going to Holyrood, he is the Secretary of State presiding over the biggest power grab since devolution began—not further devolution? Was his colleague Adam Tomkins correct this morning when he said that “Scottish Tories are unionists first and Conservatives second”? They never wanted the Scottish Parliament to succeed and now they are using Brexit to undermine it.

David Mundell: It is very clear that the hon. Gentleman and his colleagues want to break up our United Kingdom. I will defend our United Kingdom until my last breath.

Gavin Newlands: Not only have the Government taken the Scottish Government to court for trying to protect their own devolved powers; the Secretary of State is now saying that any measures offered to Scotland to reflect the overwhelming remain vote would cause him to consider his own position—a position confirmed this morning by Adam Tomkins as no idle threat made in the heat of the moment. Is he really surprised, therefore, that the Scottish people see this blatant Tory power grab for what it is, and will he follow through on his threat to go, and go now?

David Mundell: I make no apology for making it absolutely clear that the integrity of the United Kingdom is a red line for me and my Scottish Conservative colleagues in any deal on leaving the EU, and the position is exactly the same for our Prime Minister. I know that the preference of SNP Members would be a Brexit of the most disruptive kind, which they see as best able to take forward their cause.

Mhairi Black: The Migration Advisory Committee accepts the dangers to Scotland’s labour force and economy under the current UK system. Sixty-four per cent. of Scottish voters now want to see immigration policy devolved to the Scottish Parliament. Given that we have seen the reality of the cruel system that the UK Government have implemented, why not give the Scottish Parliament the right to do things differently?

David Mundell: I made it clear in my earlier response that, when these matters were considered in depth by the Smith commission, it was agreed that immigration would not be devolved. At the recent Confederation of British Industry Scotland dinner, which was attended by the First Minister of Scotland, the director general of CBI Scotland made it clear that business did not support the devolution of immigration and having a separate immigration policy in Scotland.

Kirsty Blackman: If the Secretary of State really believes that he is “fighting Scotland’s corner”, as he said in Holyrood Magazine, why is he supporting an
Agriculture Bill that will remove powers from the Scottish Parliament, and simultaneously failing to honour Tory promises on funding made to Scottish farmers?

David Mundell: Obviously, the hon. Lady did not see yesterday’s announcement by the Secretary of State for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs that there is going to be a review of convergence funding. No powers on agriculture are being removed from the Scottish Parliament, but there is a complete and utter lack of policy from the Scottish Government in relation to Scottish agriculture. They have brought forward no proposals for post-Brexit agriculture in Scotland.

Chris Stephens: Given the non-answers so far, can the Secretary of State tell us whether there are any circumstances in which he would support the devolution of powers to protect Scotland’s interests after Brexit—or is it the case, given his threats to resign, that he would rather resign his own position than support any measure aimed at ensuring that Scotland is protected from a hard, right-wing Tory Brexit?

David Mundell: As far as I am aware, there is only one party in this Parliament that has so far declared that it will support a no-deal Brexit, and that is the SNP. Nicola Sturgeon was very clear on Monday—

[Interruption.]

Mr Speaker: Order. The Secretary of State has been asked a question. He is answering the question. In that context, a lot of finger pointing is, at the very least, discourteous to the Secretary of State.

David Mundell: Thank you, Mr Speaker. As you may be aware, on Monday, Nicola Sturgeon made it clear that she will order SNP MPs in this Parliament to vote for a no-deal Brexit. What they have to decide between now and then is whether they will blindly follow her through the Lobby or truly stand up for Scotland.

Bill Grant (Ayr, Carrick and Cumnock) (Con): With reference to the fairy tale of a power grab, more than 100 powers that are currently held in Brussels are to be transferred to Holyrood after breakfast—after Brexit, I mean. The sooner the better! Does he share my concern that north-east Scotland, the heartland of the UK fishing industry, received just 15% of grants made by the Scottish Government under the European maritime and fisheries fund? Can he assure me that, as we leave the EU, he will work with the Scottish Government to ensure that the fishing communities in the north-east get the funding they need to make the most of the sea of opportunity?

David Mundell: I absolutely share my hon. Friend’s concern. As he has set out many times, as a champion of the fishing industry, it is of course the policy of the SNP Scottish Government to take Scotland right back into the common fisheries policy. It is our policy to leave the common fisheries policy but also to support the industry to take advantage of that sea of opportunity.

Ross Thomson (Aberdeen South) (Con): We will leave the hated common fisheries policy, so does my right hon. Friend agree with me and the Scottish Fishermen’s Federation that Brexit can lead to a fishing boom worth up to £2.7 billion to the economy? Does he share my concern that the Scottish Government’s proposal to keep us locked into the CFP, with decisions being made in Brussels, will betray our fishermen and our coastal communities?

David Mundell: It is incomprehensible to me and to the nearly half a million SNP voters who voted to leave the EU that the SNP Scottish Government still propose taking Scotland back into the common fisheries policy.

Stephen Kerr (Stirling) (Con): Will my right hon. Friend confirm that one potential devolution that the Government will never allow is for SNP Members to drag Scotland out of the UK against the will of the people, without even holding another referendum?

David Mundell: Mr Speaker, you have heard me say many times at the Dispatch Box that I want a second independence referendum taken off the table. What I did not mean was the solution of the hon. and learned Member for Edinburgh South West (Joanna Cherry), which is that independence could somehow be declared without a referendum.

Mrs Anne-Marie Trevelyan (Berwick-upon-Tweed) (Con): Holyrood will gain powers over agriculture after Brexit, but the Scottish Government have decided not to put a schedule into the Agriculture Bill. That is offensive and disrespectful to not only Scottish farmers, but my farmers in Northumberland who have cross-border farms. It will be incredibly difficult for them. Will my right hon. Friend support me in trying to encourage the Scottish Government to put a schedule into the Bill?

David Mundell: I think everybody outwith the SNP agrees that it would be preferable to proceed with such a schedule to the Bill, but Scottish farmers who speak
to me have one clear question: what is the Scottish Government’s policy for agriculture post Brexit? The answer is that we just do not know.

**Pete Wishart** (Perth and North Perthshire) (SNP): Over the weekend, the Secretary of State threatened to resign and almost typically managed to make a pig’s ear out of it. Apparently he was so concerned that Scotland might join Northern Ireland in an outcome that would spare us the worst Brexit excesses that he would show them and go. Surely if anything requires his resignation, it is his inability to look after and protect the devolution settlement.

**David Mundell:** The hon. Gentleman and his hon. Friends have to look the people of Scotland in the eye and tell them why they are voting for a no-deal Brexit. Day after day, we hear from them how damaging that would be for the economy of Scotland, but on Monday Nicola Sturgeon ordered the hon. Gentleman and his colleagues to vote for it. He needs to show some backbone and stand up against her.

**Mr Ranil Jayawardena** (North East Hampshire) (Con): The Smith commission was signed up to by all five parties in the Scottish Parliament. Does my right hon. Friend believe that, instead of debating powers, the SNP Government should get on and make use of the powers they already have?

**David Mundell:** It is clear that the people of Scotland want to see the extensive powers that were devolved in the Scotland Act and the powers coming forward in relation to leaving the EU used, and agriculture, as we have just discussed, is a good example. The Scottish Parliament will have those powers, but we have no idea how the Scottish Government will use them.

**Tommy Sheppard** (Edinburgh East) (SNP): In the Secretary of State’s first answer, he referred to progress at the JMC on the common frameworks, which will constrain the operation of devolved powers after Brexit. Can he update the House by saying in how many areas frameworks have been agreed, which they are and by which date he expects the remainder to be completed?

**David Mundell:** The hon. Gentleman will be aware that, under the European Union (Withdrawal) Act, the Government are obliged to inform Parliament on those matters, and a report will be brought forward in the very near future.

**Tommy Sheppard:** It sounds as if the Secretary of State does not know. The truth is that in only four of the 24 areas have frameworks been agreed, and it is now practically impossible for the exercise to be completed by 29 March. He has threatened to resign. This is something he should resign over but, if he does not resign, will he give an assurance today to rule out the use of section 12 orders to impose frameworks against the consent of a devolved Administration?

**David Mundell:** I am seeking to be helpful to the hon. Gentleman and respectful to Parliament. The Government are obliged to bring forward a report to Parliament—that is what it wishes—in which both his first and second questions will be answered.

**Lesley Laird** (Kirkcaldy and Cowdenbeath) (Lab): I ask for a moment of indulgence while I congratulate Kirkcaldy High School, which this week received the president’s award from the Convention of Scottish Local Authorities as a rights-respecting UNICEF school. Well done to everyone there.

The Secretary of State claims that protecting the integrity of the UK is the most important thing to him. The invisible man in the Cabinet got a few headlines for himself this week by flip-flopping over his threat to resign: sources close to him claimed that he would resign, but he denied it yesterday. Let us be clear—is it yes or no? If there is a deal that creates a border in the Irish sea and undermines the Union, will the Secretary of State resign?

**David Mundell:** I am very surprised that the hon. Lady should touch on the issue of resignation, since her resignation from Fife Council was such an unmitigated disaster for the Scottish Labour party. Her colleagues on the Benches opposite may not be aware, but the Scottish Conservatives won her seat.

On the issue of a border down the Irish sea, it would not be acceptable to me or my Scottish Conservative colleagues.

**Lesley Laird:** It may have escaped the Secretary of State’s notice, but that still leaves Labour in joint control of Fife Council.

The Secretary of State and his Government have just run out of ideas when it comes to Brexit, so let me give him a bit of advice: take a step further and support Labour’s suggestion for a customs union. He says that protecting the Union is his top priority, but he was silent on English votes for English laws and he has made a mess of Brexit powers coming back to Scotland from Brussels. If he really wants to protect Scotland’s place in the UK and stop a border in the Irish sea, he should back Labour’s plan for a customs union—so will he?

**David Mundell:** What I am absolutely clear on is that, whatever kind of Brexit might be achieved, the worst possible alternative would be a Labour Government for this country.

**RBS Branch Closures**

2. **Danielle Rowley** (Midlothian) (Lab): What recent discussions he has had with representatives of the Royal Bank of Scotland (RBS) on the potential effect on local communities of the proposed closure of RBS branches in Scotland.

[907021]

11. **Rosie Cooper** (West Lancashire) (Lab): What recent discussions he has had with representatives of the Royal Bank of Scotland (RBS) on the potential effect on local communities of the proposed closure of RBS branches in Scotland.

[907030]

**The Financial Secretary to the Treasury** (Mel Stride): With permission, I will answer Questions 2 and 11 together. Our position on branch closures is clear. These should be commercial decisions, not those for the interference of politicians, but equally, we do recognise some of the difficulties that constituents face when this
occurs. That is why we support the access to banking standard, which takes a number of steps both to support and to inform customers in that situation.

Danielle Rowley: RBS often says that, to make up for its pulling out of a town, the local post office will carry out the services. However, in Bonnyrigg in my constituency, the post office has shut as well, and now many businesses fear that they are going to have to close. What is the Secretary of State doing to stand up for local communities in Scotland?

Mel Stride: The hon. Lady raises a specific case of a closure of a post office in her constituency. I believe the Post Office is engaged in that particular matter but, on the general matter of post offices, they do provide a number of financial services, supported by the banking framework agreement, such that 99% of individual customers will have access for their financial needs and 95% of businesses likewise.

Mr Speaker: I call Rosie Cooper—let us hear from the hon. Lady.

Rosie Cooper: Question 11, Mr Speaker.

Mr Speaker: The hon. Lady’s question has been grouped with Question 2, as the Minister advised, so we look forward to hearing from the hon. Lady on these important matters—she has now had time to think about it—now.

Rosie Cooper: Thank you, Mr Speaker. Sorry for the confusion.

Given that RBS is 63%-owned by the taxpayer and the majority of branch closures are in Scotland or the north-west of England, could the Minister tell us: what does the taxpayer get for their money if not banks and banking services?

Mel Stride: The hon. Lady is right to raise the issue of the taxpayer supporting the Royal Bank of Scotland to the tune of some tens of billions of pounds. It is right that the Government therefore expect the bank to show profitability and to come back into economic health. Our overarching principle is that the best way of achieving that is to leave commercial organisations such as the Royal Bank of Scotland to be in charge of their own affairs, rather than subject to political interference from Ministers.

Kirstene Hair (Angus) (Con): Does my right hon. Friend agree that it was wrong of the Royal Bank of Scotland to turn its back on rural areas such as Angus, specifically when online banking is simply not viable because the SNP Government in Edinburgh have not been fast enough at rolling out broadband?

Mel Stride: My hon. Friend makes an important point about the speed of broadband roll-out. Of course, on the broadband issue, the Government in Westminster have recently made available £1 billion across the UK to stimulate market delivery of fibre and mobile coverage.

Antoinette Sandbach (Edisbury) (Con): Like rural Scotland, rural Cheshire has suffered from a number of branch closures that have left constituents without access to services that can be provided only by banks. What can the Minister do to ensure that my constituents can access those services?

Mel Stride: As I have outlined, we support the access to banking standard, but post offices have also received considerable support from this Government and are able to provide a lot of the financial services that individuals and businesses require. In rural areas, for example, 99% of residents are within three miles of the nearest post office.

PIP Reassessment Cost

4. Hugh Gaffney (Coatbridge, Chryston and Bellshill) (Lab): If he will meet the Secretary of State for Work and Pensions to discuss the potential cost to the public purse of the Government’s reassessment of people who may be eligible for personal independence payments in Scotland.

The Secretary of State for Scotland (David Mundell): Yes.

Hugh Gaffney: The Labour party and the people of Coatbridge, Chryston and Bellshill, and of Scotland, all want PIP reassessments to be scrapped immediately. They are cruel, callous and entirely inhumane. Will the Secretary of State therefore agree that they should be scrapped?

David Mundell: I can advise the hon. Gentleman that the Scottish Government have had legislative competence over PIP since May 2017, as part of this Government’s continued commitment to implement the Smith commission in full. At the Scottish Government’s request, the UK Government will continue to be responsible for PIP until the Scottish Government are ready.

Mr Paul Sweeney (Glasgow North East) (Lab/Co-op): On top of the misery that PIP reassessments are causing, by the end of the year the number of people on universal credit across Scotland will jump from 91,000 to almost half a million. The 13 Scottish Tory Members represent 82,000 people still to be moved on to universal credit, and even the Secretary of State for Work and Pensions now admits that many will find themselves worse off. Will the Secretary of State continue to let the poorest people in Scotland down, or will he have the gumption to resign unless this cliff-edge roll-out is sorted out?

David Mundell: Of course, the hon. Gentleman and others will have the opportunity to debate universal credit later today, but I am satisfied, in relation to my constituents in Scotland, that universal credit is the right approach that allows people to move into work, which is the best way out of poverty.

Christine Jardine (Edinburgh West) (LD): Every week, I am approached by constituents who have been threatened with having their PIP either taken away completely or reduced, which results in stress and has serious mental health impacts. Does the Secretary of State agree that the interviews are simply not fit for purpose and should be scrapped?
David Mundell: If the hon. Lady has specific cases, I know that the Department for Work and Pensions, which is always seeking to improve the process, will listen to what she has to say.

Scotch Whisky Industry

5. Alan Brown (Kilmarnock and Loudoun) (SNP): What recent discussions he has had with Cabinet colleagues on helping to develop the Scottish whisky industry. [907024]

The Financial Secretary to the Treasury (Mel Stride): The Government are entirely committed to the Scottish whisky industry, which exported over 1.2 billion bottles in 2017, raising £4.3 billion for the UK economy. We have provided cuts and freezes in duty since 2013, with the result that the average bottle of Scottish whisky is now £1.19 cheaper than it would otherwise have been.

Alan Brown: Until Brexit, the biggest threat to the growth of the Scotch whisky industry was the right hon. Gentleman’s Department using it as a cash cow. It is absolutely imperative that there is another freeze on whisky duty in the Budget. Can he confirm whether the Secretary of State for Scotland has made representations to Cabinet colleagues to call for a duty freeze?

Mel Stride: The hon. Gentleman has entirely overlooked the considerable support that we have already provided in duty cuts and freezes since 2013—a total of £4 billion. We will continue to support that vital sector, recognising its contribution to both the economy of Scotland and that of the wider United Kingdom.

Douglas Ross (Moray) (Con): Over the past five years, the Scotch whisky industry has invested over £500 million in capital projects in Moray and across the country. Does my right hon. Friend agree that that shows how important a good Budget for Scotch whisky is for Scotland and the UK economy?

Mel Stride: My hon. Friend is entirely right. That is another example of why we should support the Scottish whisky industry. I have received many representations, not least from Conservative Members who represent Scottish constituencies, standing up for Scottish whisky and making sure that we make the investments we need going forward.

Ian Murray (Edinburgh South) (Lab): The financial services sector is also critical for the Scottish economy and for my constituents in Edinburgh, but none of the Government’s Brexit plans mention this service sector. What can the Minister say to the financial services sector in Edinburgh, and to my constituents whose jobs depend on it, about the Government’s strategy for the service sector post Brexit?

Mr Speaker: With reference to whisky.

Mel Stride: If I interpret the question as relating to financial services specifically around whisky, Mr Speaker, the answer will be the same as for financial services generally. The Government are committed to achieving a Brexit deal with the EU27 that is in the interests of this country, that keeps trade flowing and that ensures we have an implementation period that will provide the opportunity for consistency and certainty going forward.
following the December joint report, that this is a country that honours its legal obligations and we will do exactly that. But I would also remind Members that we have been very clear, as has the EU, that nothing is agreed until everything is agreed.

Jeremy Corbyn: Last week, 63 Conservative MPs wrote to the Chancellor to complain that Treasury forecasts based on Brexit negotiations are too negative. I am just waiting for them to write to say that the legal advice is too negative as well. In December, the Prime Minister signed an agreement with the EU, which stated:

“In the absence of agreed solutions, the United Kingdom will maintain full alignment with those rules of the internal market and the customs union.”

Will she confirm that this agreement still stands and that she signed up to it without any time limit?

The Prime Minister: If the right hon. Gentleman reads the December joint report, he will see very clearly that the first way to deal with the issue of the border between Northern Ireland and Ireland is through the future relationship. As I said to this House on Monday, we have made good progress on aspects of the future relationship based on the plan that we put forward in July. We then said that there could be some Northern Ireland-specific solutions—there are already Northern Ireland-specific arrangements that take place—and that failing that, we would look at those UK-wide solutions. We were clear then, and we are clear now, that the purpose of the backstop is to bridge the gap between the end of the implementation period and ensuring that the future relationship is in place. As we have said, I expect—and intend to work for—the future relationship to be in place by 1 January 2021.

Jeremy Corbyn: My question was that the Prime Minister signed an agreement that had no time limits attached to it. Does she stand by that or not? [Interruption.]

Mr Speaker: Order. We do not need heckling from either side. It is not in keeping with good order and demonstrations of respect, from whichever side it hails.

Jeremy Corbyn: It is very strange the way that every week, a Member hides over there, to shout and hurl abuse—[Interruption.]

Mr Speaker: Order. I know that I say it every week, but I say it again: the questions will be heard and the answers will be heard. That is the situation.

Jeremy Corbyn: Thank you, Mr Speaker. The car industry is clear that it needs a new customs union to secure investment in British manufacturing. Vauxhall recently said that it would continue to invest, but there are limits and:

“Those limits are customs barriers.”

Jobs are at risk. Why will the Prime Minister not back a customs union—supported not only by Labour and trade unions, but by businesses, and I suspect by a majority in this House—to protect those jobs?

The Prime Minister: What the automotive industry and indeed other industries such as aerospace have said is that they want to see frictionless trade across the borders. Frictionless trade across our borders is exactly what lies at the heart of the free trade deal that is proposed in the Government’s plan, put forward after the Chequers meeting in July. That is what we are working to deliver for people in this country. We want to deliver a Brexit that delivers on the vote of the British people and ensures that we protect jobs and security. What would Labour deliver? They are haverling around. They think free movement could still continue. That will not deliver on the vote of the British people. They now want a second referendum, to go back to the British people and say, “Oh, we’re terribly sorry, we think you got it wrong.” There will be no second referendum; the people voted and this Government will deliver on it.

Jeremy Corbyn: My question was about investment in British industry. Jaguar Land Rover is holding off investment until it knows the terms of the deal. Jobs are at risk and manufacturers and skilled workers have little confidence in this Government, because they cannot even agree among themselves.

Last week, the Public Accounts Committee reported that the Department of Health “could not assure us of its plans to safeguard the supply of medicines after the UK has exited the European Union”. Does the Prime Minister dispute its assessment?

The Prime Minister: I think that the right hon. Gentleman was talking about the position in relation to a no-deal situation. The Department of Health is working, as are other Departments, to ensure that we have the plans in place, should it be the case that we end up in the position that we have no deal with the European Union. We continue to work for a good deal with the European Union—as I say, a deal that delivers on the Brexit vote but also protects jobs and livelihoods, and crucially protects the precious Union of the United Kingdom.

Jeremy Corbyn: The British Medical Association said that the NHS is woefully unprepared for this, and this week the pharmaceutical company AstraZeneca has suspended investments in Britain due to a lack of clarity over the future.

The Conservative party has spent two years arguing with itself instead of negotiating a deal in the public interest, and now, just days before the deadline, Conservative Members are still bickering among themselves. The Prime Minister and her Government are too weak and too divided to protect people’s jobs and our economy, or ensure there is no hard border in Northern Ireland—[Interruption.]

Mr Speaker: Order. Members are a little overexcited. Just calm down!

Jeremy Corbyn: The Prime Minister and her Government are clearly too weak and too divided to protect people’s jobs and our economy or to ensure there is no hard border in Northern Ireland, so she has a choice: she can continue to put the Tory party’s interests first, or she can listen to unions and businesses and put the interests of the people of Britain first. Which is it to be?

The Prime Minister: The right hon. Gentleman has spoken in a number of his questions about protecting jobs. I note that he has said nothing about the
unemployment figures this week. I will tell him overall what this Government are delivering for the people of this country: the scrapping of the council borrowing cap, so that councils can build more homes for people; an end to austerity, so that people’s hard work pays off; a freezing of fuel duty for a ninth year, so that there is more money in people’s pockets; the lowest unemployment for 40 years; youth unemployment halved; and wages rising faster than at any time in a decade. Labour can play politics; the Conservatives deliver for the people of this country.

Hon. Members: More!

Mr Speaker: There will be more, and it will be from Mr Tim Loughton.

Q5. [907109] Tim Loughton (East Worthing and Shoreham) (Con): The Prime Minister is very familiar with my five-year campaign to extend civil partnerships to all couples, and my private Member’s Bill has now completed its Committee stage, so I welcome her recent announcement that it is now Government policy, albeit without a timeline and with my having to find out about it by reading the press. Will she now support amendments to my Bill on Report in nine days as the quickest way to make equal civil partnerships a reality for the many thousands who want her to get on with it?

The Prime Minister: I am pleased that we are supporting my hon. Friend’s proposal on civil partnerships. We are working with him on his private Member’s Bill and will be supporting him on it. I understand that some small amendments are required, and officials will be discussing those with him.

Ian Blackford (Ross, Skye and Lochaber) (SNP): It is in all our interests—and in the interests of jobs, in particular—that the Prime Minister comes back from Brussels with the right deal. We will act as a constructive Opposition—the enemy is behind her. Yesterday, the former Conservative Prime Minister, Sir John Major, said that Brexit would leave the UK a poorer and weaker country. Previously, another Conservative party leader told the BBC that “People’s jobs would be put at risk” as a result of Brexit. Does she agree with these statements?

The Prime Minister: As the right hon. Gentleman knows, the plan that we have put forward for our future relationship with the EU would protect jobs and livelihoods in this country and enable us to get not just that good trading relationship with the EU but good trading relationships around the rest of the world.

Ian Blackford: “People’s jobs would be put at risk”—those are the words of this Prime Minister in June 2016. No Prime Minister should negotiate a deal that threatens jobs. She must accept responsibility and avoid an economic catastrophe. Prime Minister, go to Brussels, act in the interests of all citizens across the UK and negotiate to keep us in the single market and customs union. That will command a majority in the House of Commons. Does the Prime Minister not understand that staying in the single market and the customs union is the only deal that will get through this House?

The Prime Minister: As I have explained in the Chamber on a number of occasions, and will continue to explain, our proposal delivers on the referendum vote, but also ensures that we protect jobs and livelihoods in the United Kingdom. However if the right hon. Gentleman is interested in ensuring that the interests of everyone in Scotland are taken into account in the negotiations that we undertake, he should join us in recognising the importance of leaving the common fisheries policy.

Q8. [907112] Sir Patrick McLoughlin (Derbyshire Dales) (Con): The vast majority of people in the United Kingdom will wish the Prime Minister well in the very tricky negotiations that she must undertake, which no other Prime Minister has had to do in our history. Will she ensure that the outcome of those negotiations will allow us to continue to attract the levels of inward investment that we have been attracting, which have caused unemployment to fall by more than 1 million people in the last six years?

The Prime Minister: My right hon. Friend is absolutely right, and I thank him for raising that issue. Inward investment in the UK is important because it supports jobs here, and we want to ensure that we remain an attractive place for that investment. We also want to encourage it through the deals that we are doing with countries around the world. Free trade deals mean greater choice, lower prices for British consumers, more export opportunities for British businesses, and increased investment here in the UK. Leaving the European Union gives us an opportunity to forge even better relationships and even better connections with the rest of the world, to encourage that inward investment and bring yet more jobs to the UK.

Q2. [907106] Steve McCabe (Birmingham, Selly Oak) (Lab): Even the Prime Minister’s fiercest critics—I believe she has a few—must be full of admiration for the way in which she manages her diabetic condition and holds down such a tough and demanding job. I understand that she benefits from a FreeStyle Libre glucose monitoring system. Wouldn’t it be nice if she did something to make that benefit available to the half a million people who are denied it because of NHS rationing? Perhaps we could call it “help for the many, not the few”.

The Prime Minister: I thank the hon. Gentleman for his comments. I do use a FreeStyle Libre, and it is now available on the national health service, but it is not the only means of continuous glucose monitoring that is available on the NHS. Yesterday I saw a letter from a child—a young girl—who had started on the FreeStyle Libre, but, because of the hypo that she had been having, had been moved to a different glucose monitoring system. There is no one system that is right for everyone; what is important is that those systems are now available on the NHS.

Q9. [907113] Steve Double (St Austell and Newquay) (Con): The Government’s announcement of a pilot scheme for seasonal agricultural workers has been warmly welcomed by fruit and vegetable farmers in Cornwall and, indeed, across the country, but that is not the only sector that relies heavily on seasonal migrant workers. The tourism and hospitality sector is anxious to be able to continue to access its seasonal workforce after we have left the
EU. What action are the Government taking to ensure that the tourism sector, which is so important to our economy, will still be able to access the workforce that it needs, and will my right hon. Friend consider a seasonal workers scheme for that sector?

The Prime Minister: I thank my hon. Friend for highlighting the seasonal workers pilot scheme that we have introduced. The horticultural sector is a particular British success story. Over the last 20 years we have seen a significant growth in soft fruit production: an increase of more than 130%. We have made clear that we are piloting the scheme and will assess how it will work. Obviously we will announce further details of the overall immigration policy that we have proposed, but we will ensure that we recognise the needs of the British economy.

Q3. [907107] Alex Norris (Nottingham North) (Lab/Co-op): Yesterday, Nottingham Citizens published a report on hate crime in our schools, which it highlighted as a growing issue. I was particularly struck by the lack of awareness among the children who were surveyed of what actually constitutes a hate crime. We have failed those young people by not yet properly arming them with the knowledge and skills that will enable them to thrive in this challenging world. Will the Prime Minister meet me, and a delegation of young people from my city, to discuss how to change that?

The Prime Minister: The hon. Gentleman has raised a very important issue about hate crime, and we have been taking a number of steps over recent years. My right hon. Friend the Home Secretary has published an updated action plan, and I suggest that the hon. Gentleman and those young people meet the Home Secretary to discuss how that action plan can help to address the issues raised.

Q11. [907115] Kevin Hollinrake (Thirsk and Malton) (Con): Our joint Health and Social Care and Housing, Communities and Local Government Committees inquiry into the future funding of adult social care recommended a social insurance system of the type that has been so successful in Germany. Will the Prime Minister give her fullest consideration to this solution, which would mean that everyone is protected from the potentially catastrophic costs of care?

The Prime Minister: I thank my hon. Friend and the health and the local government Select Committees for their work on this important issue. It is important that we get social care on a sustainable footing for the future and alleviate the short-term pressures on both social care and health systems. Obviously we have given more money to councils, but we will be publishing a Green Paper later this year setting out proposals for reform. It will look across the board at a number of proposals that have been put forward in this area, and we will certainly consider those put forward by the Committee.

Q4. [907108] Ian C. Lucas (Wrexham) (Lab): Pensioners over 75 face having to find an extra £150.50 every year if current proposals to take away free TV licences come to fruition. Will the Prime Minister take responsibility for this policy, speak to the BBC and find a solution that does not pickpocket pensioners?

The Prime Minister: As the hon. Gentleman knows, the arrangements for the free licences change were part of the last BBC settlement. The money is being made available to the BBC and it will take decisions on how it operates.

Q13. [907117] Simon Hoare (North Dorset) (Con): It is extraordinary that the Labour party has nothing to say about the good news of the fall in unemployment—falling by 50,000, and now at the lowest rate in my lifetime. More importantly I would suggest, wages are growing. That is particularly good news in constituencies such as North Dorset, where incomes are below the national average. Does my right hon. Friend agree that thousands of families across our country are now benefiting from the security of a regular pay packet and our balanced Tory approach to the economy?

The Prime Minister: My hon. Friend is absolutely right to highlight the excellent news on employment: employment at a near record high, unemployment at its lowest rate since the 1970s, youth unemployment, as I said earlier, halved under this Government and at a new record low, and real wages rising. As my hon. Friend says, what that means is more people with the security of a job, more people with a regular salary, more people able to support their families. We are only able to ensure that that takes place by having a balanced approach to the economy, and that is the Conservative way.

Q6. [907110] Mr Alistair Carmichael (Orkney and Shetland) (LD): The Bedouin community of Khan al-Ahmar in the occupied Palestinian territories faces imminent demolition and is currently being swamped with sewage from the nearby settlement of Kfar Adummim. Just this morning Israeli forces have tasered and pepper-sprayed activists there. Will the Prime Minister make it clear to the Prime Minister of Israel that this is an occupied territory that these are refugees—protected people whose forcible removal would constitute, as the United Nations has stated, a war crime?

The Prime Minister: My right hon. Friend the Minister for the Middle East met the Israeli ambassador on 11 October. He made clear the UK’s deep concerns about Israel’s planned demolition of the village of Khan al-Ahmar. Its demolition would be a major blow to the prospect of a two-state solution with Jerusalem as a shared capital, and I once again call on the Israeli Government not to go ahead with its plan to demolish the village, including its school, and displace its residents.

Q14. [907118] Mrs Kemi Badenoch (Saffron Walden) (Con): My constituent Elliot Peters died earlier this year from hyperammonemia aged just 14. His parents, Holly and Andy Storey, are understandably devastated. Elliot’s condition was not diagnosed early enough; by the time he was placed on dialysis it was too late. Will the Prime Minister meet me and Elliot’s parents to discuss raising awareness of the condition and adding hyperammonemia testing to A&E departments when a patient presents symptoms?

The Prime Minister: This is an extremely tragic case, and I offer my sincere condolences to Elliot’s family and friends. I understand that the condition is associated with an inherited metabolic condition. Some of these
conditions are very rare and staff are not always on the lookout for symptoms of such rare conditions, but we are committed to ensuring that the NHS always seeks to learn when things go wrong, to ensure that such tragic events can be prevented for future parents. I am sure that a Minister from the Department of Health and Social Care will be happy to meet my hon. Friend and Elliot’s parents to discuss this.

Q7. [907111] Pete Wishart (Perth and North Perthshire) (SNP): In the face of clear breaches of electoral law where the Vote Leave campaign might just have cheated its way to victory, the police refuse to undertake a criminal investigation because of what they say are “political sensitivities”. This comes on top of all the issues of unaccounted dark money sustaining the Scottish Conservatives. Does the Prime Minister believe that our electoral laws are fit for purpose, and what will she personally do to ensure that our democracy is defended from those who would seek to circumvent it?

The Prime Minister: As the hon. Gentleman will know, the Electoral Commission is an independent regulator, accountable to Parliament and not to the Government. There is a very important constitutional principle in this country that politicians do not interfere with police investigations, and that everyone is innocent until proven guilty in a court of law, but we will be considering the wider implications for Government policy. We will review very carefully the Electoral Commission’s recent report on digital campaigning and the Information Commissioner’s recommendations on the use of data in politics. Also, the Digital, Culture, Media and Sport Committee is conducting an inquiry, and we will look at its recommendations when it concludes. As regards the vote in the referendum, I must remind the hon. Gentleman that 17.4 million people voted to leave the EU, on a turnout of three quarters of the electorate, and it is up to this Parliament and this Government to deliver on that mandate.

Q15. [907119] Alan Mak (Havant) (Con): I welcome the Government’s extra funding for our NHS. Will my right hon. Friend ensure that some of this new money is used to improve and upgrade NHS technology, which can both save more lives and improve patient care?

The Prime Minister: First, I should like to thank my hon. Friend for his report on the use of technology in the NHS. We are dedicated to using this new funding to support technology transformation and modernisation, and capital funding is being provided to the NHS to upgrade equipment and to construct new buildings and refurbish existing ones. In the 10-year plan, we want to see the NHS embracing the opportunities of technology so that we can not only improve patient care but save more lives and deliver healthcare more efficiently.

Q10. [90714] Siobhain McDonagh (Mitcham and Morden) (Lab): In Mitcham and Morden, Brexit means that the Wilson hospital will not reopen, after funders pulled out due to economic uncertainty. Goodness knows how many communities are now going to lose their health centres and GP surgeries. We must have missed that Brexit bus. Will the Prime Minister give Mitcham and Morden a people’s vote on Brexit so that we can save our hospital, or will she today guarantee the reopening of the Wilson?

The Prime Minister: As we announced earlier this year, we have asked the NHS to produce a 10-year plan, and we will be providing a multi-year funding settlement for the NHS. Within that, we are able to provide extra money to the NHS as a result of not sending vast amounts of money to the European Union every year when we leave the European Union. That is an advantage of Brexit.

John Howell (Henley) (Con): Will the Prime Minister join me in acknowledging the tremendous amount of hard work being done by the Thame remembrance project in my constituency? Three hundred people have travelled 150,000 miles to commemorate all the 212 who lost their lives in various conflicts.

The Prime Minister: I am very happy to join my hon. Friend in commending all those who have undertaken those journeys to ensure that that remembrance continues. It is important that we are able to recognise the contributions that people have made in conflict.

Q12. [907116] Jamie Stone (Caithness, Sutherland and Easter Ross) (LD): The Prime Minister will be only too well aware that people living in the remote highlands and islands are being penalised by extra charges for the delivery of goods and utilities. Indeed, I would say that this is a wholly unfair geography tax on my constituents. May I appeal to her to consider and look favourably upon the proposal that a royal commission be set up to look into these extra charges and into how they could be eliminated?

The Prime Minister: We have taken the price of parcel surcharges seriously, including those for more remote constituencies. We set up the consumer protection partnership to bring together various consumer bodies from the advice and enforcement world to look at the transparency, accuracy, level and fairness of delivery charges. I am sure that the relevant Minister from the Department for Business, Energy and Industrial Strategy will be happy to meet the hon. Gentleman to discuss the matter further.

Mr Steve Baker (Wycombe) (Con): Could I ask my right hon. Friend to impress upon our European friends two points that I hope the House will think reasonable and practical? The first is that the European Union may not break apart the Union of the United Kingdom, and the second is that the EU may not direct how we regulate our economy and govern ourselves after we have left the European Union.

The Prime Minister: Certainly, I am very clear that when we have left the European Union we will be taking decisions here in the United Kingdom on all the issues that were previously decided in the European Union. We will be taking control of our laws, our money and our borders. On my hon. Friend’s first point, I made it clear earlier this year, have continued to make it clear and will carry on making it clear that we will not accept any proposals that would effectively break up the United Kingdom.
Nigel Dodds (Belfast North) (DUP): Given that nothing is agreed until everything is agreed, does the Prime Minister accept that it would be difficult for the House to be asked to confirm a legally binding withdrawal agreement without having clear assurances and some precision about the details of the future trading relationship?

The Prime Minister: I agree with the right hon. Gentleman. As I have always said, when we bring the withdrawal agreement package back to the House, it is important that Members are able not only to consider the withdrawal agreement, but to have sufficient detail about all aspects of the future relationship. The trading relationship is important, but our future security relationship, for both internal and external security and other issues, is also of importance. It is also important to me that there is a linkage between that future relationship and the withdrawal agreement.

Julian Knight (Solihull) (Con): Not long ago, we had the horror of three pigs’ heads being left outside a Muslim community centre in Solihull. Then English Defence League thugs came to my proud, multicultural town, but we turned our backs on them. In the light of such events, will the Prime Minister join me in utterly condemning the actions of a Solihull Green councillor, as reported in the Birmingham Mail, who has written a guide to attracting and tricking British National party voters? There is no place for pandering to racism in my town or in our politics.

The Prime Minister: I absolutely agree with my hon. Friend. There is no place in our society for pandering to racism of any sort, and that message should be sent out clearly by the whole House. He referred to what happened at one of his local mosques. The Home Secretary has been pleased to make extra money available for the security of places of worship, because we sadly see places of worship of different faiths being subjected to attacks all too often. However, my hon. Friend’s key point that there is no place for racism in our society is absolutely right.

Danielle Rowley (Midlothian) (Lab): The Work and Pensions Committee heard evidence that the lack of automatic split payments for universal credit means that women are being trapped in abusive relationships. That absolutely disgusts me, but how does it make the Prime Minister feel?

The Prime Minister: We take the issue of domestic violence and abusive relationships very seriously indeed. Split payments obviously are available when they are the right thing for couples, but we need to take a sensitive approach to cases on an individual basis. We all want to ensure that women in abusive relationships are getting the support that they need, and we should send a message of clear condemnation of that abuse from across this House.

Dr Julian Lewis (New Forest East) (Con): The next time shroud-waving EU negotiators claim that a hard border is necessary on the island of Ireland, will the Prime Minister kindly ask them who would actually construct it? The Irish certainly will not and the British certainly will not, so unless the EU army plans to march in and build it, it surely can never happen.

The Prime Minister: I say to my right hon. Friend that we are all working to ensure that there will be no hard border between Northern Ireland and Ireland. That is the clear commitment of the United Kingdom Government as agreed by the European Union when we signed the December joint report.

Mr Ben Bradshaw (Exeter) (Lab): My constituent Matthew Hedges, a young PhD student, has been held in a jail in the United Arab Emirates for more than five months, and this week he was charged with spying. Will the Prime Minister ensure that her Government make it quite clear to the UAE that Matt was in the country to do academic research, and nothing more? Will she also ensure that he receives full consular and legal support, and a fair trial, so that he can return to his wife, Dani, in England as soon as possible?

The Prime Minister: Obviously this is a very difficult and distressing time for Mr Hedges and his family. Foreign Office officials are supporting Mr Hedges and his family, and they have raised the case with the Emiratis at the highest levels. My right hon. Friend the Foreign Secretary has personally raised this case with his Emirati counterpart. We are in regular contact with the Emiratis regarding Mr Hedges’s health and wellbeing, and we continue to push for consular access to ensure that he is given the support he needs.

Mr John Baron (Basildon and Billericay) (Con): In welcoming the Japanese Prime Minister’s suggestion that we can join the Trans-Pacific Partnership when we leave the EU, and in wishing my right hon. Friend well in the upcoming negotiations, will she please confirm that our joining and fully participating in the TPP will not be hindered by the common rulebook of the Chequers agreement and that the whole United Kingdom will benefit?

The Prime Minister: I have been pleased to discuss our potential membership of the TPP with the former Australian Prime Minister and with the Japanese Prime Minister. I am pleased that the Australian Government and the Japanese Government are welcoming us in joining the TPP. One of the issues we looked at when we put forward our proposals for our future trading relationship with the European Union was precisely whether it would mean we cannot join the comprehensive and progressive agreement for trans-Pacific partnership—the CPTPP. I am happy to reassure my hon. Friend that we would be able to join the CPTPP under the relationship proposed in the Government’s plan.

Teresa Pearce (Erith and Thamesmead) (Lab): My constituent came to see me earlier this year about being sexually harassed at work by a co-worker. Despite many months of meetings with her human resources department and line management, she has been treated like the problem rather than the victim. Can the Prime Minister advise me on what I can do to help my constituent to return to work and feel safe when her employer is this House?

The Prime Minister: It is important that everybody is treated with dignity and respect in their workplace. There is no place for bullying, sexual harassment or abuse in any workplace, including this Parliament. I am
sure we are all very concerned about Dame Laura Cox’s report. We have been working on this issue here in this House, and I particularly commend my right hon. Friend the Leader of the House, who has been working tirelessly to try to change our culture and practices. I hope there will be a very serious, very full and proper response to Dame Laura Cox’s report. This should worry all of us, and I want to see a situation where the constituent of the hon. Member for Erith and Thamesmead (Teresa Pearce) is able to come to work in this House and be treated with dignity and respect, and not be subject to bullying, harassment or abuse.

Luke Graham (Ochil and South Perthshire) (Con): The UK Agriculture Bill is currently before this House. Wales, England and Northern Ireland are part of the Bill but, due to the Scottish National party, Scotland is excluded and isolated. Will my right hon. Friend commit this Government to working with all parties to deliver an Agriculture Bill that guarantees that Scotland and my constituents are not left behind?

The Prime Minister: My hon. Friend raises a very important point, and I am happy to give him the assurance that we will work with parties in this House to ensure that Scotland is not left behind and that we have an Agriculture Bill that actually works for all of us and for all our agricultural sector.

Mr Ivan Lewis (Bury South) (Ind): The Prime Minister has an admirable sense of duty, so will she be honest about Brexit? There is now only one viable option in the short term that can reconcile the referendum result with the interests of all parts of the United Kingdom, with the genuine concerns of many Members on both sides of the House about the impact of a flawed deal or no deal, with our communities and with Labour’s tests. We should join the European Free Trade Association and the European economic area and seek EU agreement to remain in the customs union for a specified period from the date we leave. We should make it clear that, on joining the EEA, we will exercise our right to put an emergency brake on the free movement of labour. It may not be the perfect option, but our only consideration now should be the national interest.

Mr Speaker: We have got the drift, and we are grateful.

The Prime Minister: The only consideration for this Government is the national interest. That is why we have put forward a proposal that delivers on the vote of the referendum; that ensures that we leave the European Union on 29 March 2019 and will no longer send vast sums of money annually to the European Union; that ensures we will take control of our laws and borders; that ensures there will not be the jurisdiction of the European Court of Justice in this country; that ensures that free movement will end; and that also protects jobs and livelihoods, and protects the Union of the United Kingdom. That is in the national interest and that is what the Government have proposed.

Several hon. Members rose—

Mr Speaker: Order.
Point of Order

12.41 pm

Marsha De Cordova (Battersea) (Lab): On a point of order, Mr Speaker. I seek your guidance as to whether you have received notification from the Secretary of State for Work and Pensions that she will be making an oral statement on the employment and support allowance underpayments figures released this morning. The figures show that 180,000 ill and disabled people were underpaid by the Government—by almost £1 billion. That is significantly more than the 70,000 the DWP claimed were initially affected. I would be grateful for your guidance on how Members might have the opportunity to question the Secretary of State on these figures, as just under 200,000 disabled people may be affected.

Mr Speaker: I am grateful to the hon. Lady for her attempted point of order and for her courtesy in giving me advance notice of her intention to raise it. The short answer is that I have received no indication from a member of the Government of an intention to make an oral statement on this matter today or, indeed, imminently at all. Of course, a very important debate is to take place now. Whether she can use her legendary guile to highlight this matter while remaining within the terms of order is a test for her and perhaps also for others—that remains to be seen. The Secretary of State, who is in the Chamber, will have heard what has been said, and I feel sure that if the hon. Lady is persistent in seeking to raise this matter, there may be opportunities to do so in the coming days. I know she is new to the House, but she has already acquired great experience in that short time and she will know that there are mechanisms that enable Members to secure the presence of Ministers in the Chamber. We will leave it there for now.

If there are no further points of order, we come to the ten-minute rule motion, for which the hon. Member for East Renfrewshire (Paul Masterton) has been patiently waiting.

Collective Defined Contribution Pension Schemes

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

12.43 pm

Paul Masterton (East Renfrewshire) (Con): I beg to move,

That leave be given to bring in a Bill to enable the establishment of collective defined contribution pension schemes, and for connected purposes.

Having worked as a solicitor specialising in pensions law for the best part of a decade before being elected to represent East Renfrewshire—yes, that was as exciting as it sounds—and as a member of the all-party group on pensions, I believe that the pension system is one of this country’s great achievements. Throughout the decades, both state and workplace pensions have existed to provide for people’s retirement, and to give them a comfortable and dignified later life. But over that long history there have also been times of great change. As circumstances change, as we live longer, and as new models and new approaches develop, the way we make that provision for people’s retirement has changed. This Bill is about the dry business of reform of private pensions and fiscal stability in a globalised complex business environment, but it is also about the 140,000 men and women working for Royal Mail across the United Kingdom, including the 143 in East Renfrewshire who serve more than 30,000 households from delivery offices in Barrhead, Clarkston and Newton Mearns, and ensuring that they get the best possible outcome in retirement.

Royal Mail currently operates a defined-benefit scheme, but as life expectancies have risen and the regulatory burden has increased, the risks and volatility inherent in a defined-benefit scheme, which provides a guaranteed level of benefits on retirement, are increasingly unaffordable. At the same time, defined-contribution schemes, in which the level of retirement provision is linked to the “pot” saved during the accumulation phase, shift pretty much the entire burden of risk towards the employee. For some time, the industry has toyed with a middle way. That is what the Bill is about.

Royal Mail and the Communication Workers Union have agreed in principle to introduce for the first time in the UK a new kind of pension scheme: a collective defined-contribution scheme, or CDC. The fact that this innovative development has come as a result of co-operation between employer and union is a testament to the power of constructive industrial relations in benefiting company and workforce. As a Scottish Conservative, I know that constructive action is more effective than needless confrontation, and the work of Royal Mail and the CWU in developing the CDC proposal bears that out. Indeed, I hope that this kind of positive employer behaviour and positive trade unionism can serve as an example to businesses and trade unions up and down the country. I have been greatly impressed by the modern, proactive approach to the issue taken by the CWU, and its work does the union great credit.

CDCs claim the much needed middle ground between defined-benefit schemes and defined-contribution schemes, balancing in a slightly more even way the risks, rights and responsibilities between employer and employee. That should mean higher-quality pensions that are
affordable and sustainable for all involved. Although contributions, rather than benefits, are defined in CDCs, their collective aspect means that risks arising from matters such as longevity, investment and inflation are shared collectively, rather than borne by each individual member.

In an age of increased flexibility and choice, the flip from passive saver to engaged retiree can be difficult and the choice of retirement products confusing. Traditionally, annuities have offered poor value, while drawdown provides higher returns and is less reliant on market conditions at one snapshot, but the individual bears the ongoing investment risk and could exhaust their pot if they miscalculate their own longevity. If someone has a defined-contribution scheme, they effectively act as their own actuary and investment consultant or—more likely—they take a very low level of guidance on approaching retirement, having spent their entire working life invested in a default fund. That affects the level of their retirement saving.

Supporters of CDC schemes argue that they can deliver higher returns than traditional money-purchase schemes for the same level of contributions, partly because CDC pension pots would not need to take as cautious an investment approach as those in more conventional defined-contribution schemes. The need to de-risk in the years leading up to retirement to protect against a sudden drop in pot value is removed in a collective scheme. A report by the Work and Pensions Committee, which has joined the growing calls from employers, unions and others for action to allow CDCs to be established, has said that such enhanced freedom of investment could also benefit the wider economy, as CDC schemes invest more heavily in more innovative firms. It is clear that CDCs would offer major advantages for employees, compared with defined-contribution pensions. Understandably, unions and workers oppose the closure of defined-benefit schemes, but the reality is that were they to continue to open, many employers would go under and jobs would be lost.

In my seven years in practice, I advised a range of employers and trustee boards on the closure of dozens of schemes. In every case, the company in question made the same justification: the defined-benefit scheme was unaffordable and unsustainable in terms of cost and risk. Many such schemes are wholly legacy arrangements, often found in the industries least able to sustain them. Likewise, we must not ignore the fact that when a defined-benefit scheme becomes more and more of a burden on an employer, it restricts what else that employer can do. It is a drag on investment and a drag on the economy. Deficit-repair contributions and high levels of ongoing pensionable salary contributions reduce the ability to invest and to increase pay.

We need a solution that works for both employee and employer, and that is what I believe CDCs such as the one proposed by Royal Mail and the CWU to be. It would share the risks in a way that is fair and responsible. People might wonder why CDCs have not already taken off, why Royal Mail has not just gone ahead already or, indeed, why half the major employers in the UK are not rushing to set up CDC schemes. The reason is quite simply that they are not really possible under the current legislative framework. Innovative schemes of this kind cannot operate in the UK without primary legislation. Because of the way parts of the framework work, particularly in relation to the statutory funding regime, an attempt to establish a CDC would run into all kinds of practical difficulties.

There have been calls to use the Pension Schemes Act 2015 or the Pensions Act 2011 to introduce CDCs, but those pieces of legislation are bound up with various other issues. I firmly believe that the best approach is to introduce clear primary legislation specifically aimed at the introduction of CDCs of the kind proposed by Royal Mail and the CWU. CDC pension schemes already operate in countries such as the Netherlands, Canada and Denmark, and we can learn from that experience—both good and bad. I am pleased that the UK Government have recognised that. The UK Government’s pension reforms, and automatic enrolment in particular, have been hugely successful, and I am glad that the Government have recognised that the introduction of these innovative and desirable pension schemes would build on that great success, but they are not a silver bullet. There are questions and considerations regarding the practical operation and scheme design, but that is not a reason simply to sit on our hands when employers and employee representative bodies wish to look seriously at this option for workplace pension saving. We should not be fooled into thinking that they are a magic solution to all problems—they are not—but they are a serious, credible and valid option that this Government should legislate to permit.

I very much welcome the announcement by the pensions Minister of a consultation this autumn on the introduction of CDC pensions—although I did kind of expect it to have been brought forward already—and I hope that the Government can make progress on that consultation as soon as possible. I hope that, by bringing in this Bill today, I can help to encourage that process along and give the Minister a helpful nudge along the way.

As a Conservative, I do not believe that we should allow the state and regulation to get in the way of employers and employees working together to develop an innovative solution that works to their mutual benefit. We should institute this common-sense, free market reform, so that this union-backed solution to a 21st century business problem can progress. [Interruption.]

Mr Speaker: Order. The hon. Member for Bexhill and Battle (Huw Merriman) was not seeking to contribute on this matter, was he?

Huw Merriman (Bexhill and Battle) (Con) indicated dissent.

Mr Speaker: No. The hon. Gentleman was just taking some exercise. We are very grateful to him—[Interruption.] The hon. Member for Vale of Clwyd (Chris Ruane) says that he is standing up for himself. Well, people often do not know whether or not I am standing up.

Question put and agreed to.

Ordered.

That Paul Masterton, John Lamont, Kirstene Hair, Nigel Mills, Richard Graham and Frank Field present the Bill.

Paul Masterton accordingly presented the Bill.

Bill read the First time; to be read a Second time on Friday 23 November, and to be printed ( Bill 274).
Yvette Cooper (Normanton, Pontefract and Castleford) (Lab): On a point of order, Mr Speaker. In the urgent question on clinical waste incineration yesterday, in response to my question, the Minister for Health, the hon. Member for North East Cambridgeshire (Stephen Barclay), assured me that the TUPE process was being pursued for my constituents in Normanton where they have lost the contract for NHS waste. However, I have heard from some of those constituents today that they have been told that they will not be TUPE-ed and that no process is being followed. This is clearly a very serious concern, given that we would expect there to be both legal and moral obligations towards hardworking staff who have great expertise and experience in waste management. Have you heard anything from the Department of Health and Social Care or the Minister about changing the answer that I was given yesterday, or about anything that has changed since?

Mr Speaker: I am very grateful to the right hon. Lady for her point of order. The short answer is that, no, I have had no indication that a Minister intends to come to the House to correct the record. As she will be well aware, every Member of this House, including every Minister, is responsible for the accuracy of what he or she says in this place. If it is thought that an error has been made, it is the responsibility of the erring Member to put the record straight. May I politely suggest that the right hon. Lady seeks to engage with the Minister today? She may well find that that provides some satisfaction. If that turns out not to be the case, I know of no Member more versatile and experienced in this place in ensuring that what she wants to be aired in the Chamber is aired in the Chamber. This matter will have to be resolved sooner rather than later—either privately or publicly. I hope that that is helpful to her.

Nick Thomas-Symonds (Torfaen) (Lab): On a point of order, Mr Speaker. Since I came into this House, I have campaigned on greater access to off-patent drugs for people with the most serious conditions. In recent years, the drug repurposing group has produced a very important report on this, and many people are waiting to see whether the Government will act on its recommendations. I put in a written question to the Secretary of State for Health and Social Care, and the response I got was simply that there would be a Government response in due course. That was disappointing to many people. Mr Speaker, can you advise me on how I might get a more precise answer to the question?

Mr Speaker: Well, the opportunities available to the hon. Gentleman are very real. [Interruption.] They are almost endless, as the hon. Member for Vale of Clwyd (Chris Ruane) chunter from a sedentary position with due mindfulness of what he speaks. First, the hon. Member for Torfaen (Nick Thomas-Symonds) can table further questions to try to extract the information that he seeks and, secondly, if he is still dissatisfied he can of course seek an Adjournment debate on the matter. Who knows? He might find that his application for an Adjournment debate, which would give him an opportunity for concentrated focus on the subject and engagement with the responsible Minister, would bear fruit. I think we will leave it there for now. I hope that that is helpful to the hon. Gentleman and that he feels enlightened and inspired.

Margaret Greenwood (Wirral West) (Lab): I beg to move,

That an humble Address be presented to Her Majesty, That she will be graciously pleased to give directions that the following papers be laid before Parliament: any briefing papers or analysis provided to the Secretary of State for Work and Pensions since 8 January 2018 on the impact of the roll-out of universal credit on recipients’ and household income and on benefits data.

Universal credit, the Government’s flagship social security programme, has been beset by flaws in its design and delivery. It is causing immense hardship for many people wherever it is rolled out. It is hard to believe now, but universal credit was designed to lift people out of poverty and smooth the transition into work to ensure that it always pays. The reality is that universal credit is a vehicle for cuts: cuts in support for families with a disabled child for whom the basic rate of support is half what it is in tax credits; cuts in support for disabled people in work, such as the disabled person who wrote to us saying that they are more than £300 a month worse off since switching from claiming working tax credits; and cuts in support for lone parents bringing up children, who will get more than £20 a week less on average, with many losing far more.

Stephen Doughty (Cardiff South and Penarth) (Lab/Co-op): My hon. Friend is absolutely right to start with the issue on how universal credit is impacting on those with disabilities, the vulnerable and the unwell. I have a constituent who is caring for her disabled daughter and who has her own mental health problems. She was given the wrong advice by the Department for Work and Pensions and was left with £1,000 of rent arrears and universal credit not paid. What a shambles this policy is.

Margaret Greenwood: My hon. Friend makes the point so clearly: what a shambles and what a hardship for that family.

Huw Merriman (Bexhill and Battle) (Con): My hon. Friend is absolutely right to start with the issue on how universal credit is impacting on those with disabilities, the vulnerable and the unwell. I have a constituent who is caring for her disabled daughter and who has her own mental health problems. She was given the wrong advice by the Department for Work and Pensions and was left with £1,000 of rent arrears and universal credit not paid. What a shambles this policy is.

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Margaret Greenwood: My hon. Friend makes the point so clearly: what a shambles and what a hardship for that family.
Margaret Greenwood: I will make some progress and then I will take some interventions.

For more than a year now, Opposition Members have been calling on the Government to address the policy’s many flaws. I am talking about: the insistence on digital by default when many people trying to make a claim are either not able to use IT or do not have access to it; the monthly payment in arrears when so many people on low incomes are used to being paid fortnightly or even weekly; its inability to cope with fluctuating income that is part and parcel of life on low-paid, insecure work or self-employment; and the payment to a single person in a household that can make it more difficult for someone suffering domestic violence to leave an abusive relationship.

Mr Jim Cunningham (Coventry South) (Lab): I thank my hon. Friend for giving way. Does she agree, first, that we should call a halt to this process; secondly, that many people have been driven into the hands of money lenders; thirdly, that many people have found themselves in rent arrears; and, fourthly, that usage of food banks has gone up as a result of this policy?

Margaret Greenwood: My hon. Friend makes a number of pertinent points. He is absolutely right to call on the Government to halt the roll-out of universal credit.

Other flaws include: the online journal in which people have to record the jobs that they have spent 35 hours a week applying for, but which work coaches often struggle to find the time to monitor; and the five-week wait for a payment at the start of a claim. According to the latest Government figures, 17% of claims were not paid in full and on time, and one person in 10 did not receive any payment at all. Groups such as carers or parents who need help with childcare are more likely than others to have to wait for their first payment. The latest figures show that only a third of people who are ill or disabled were paid on time.

Huw Merriman: Will the hon. Lady also spare some time to talk about the 700,000 people who will be better off by an average of £285 a month under universal credit, as well as those who find work through it?

Margaret Greenwood: The hon. Gentleman is getting ahead of himself, because there is no evidence that the Government can demonstrate whether universal credit gets people into work.

The Government’s answer to the delays was to provide advances, but they have to be paid back, as do debts for utility bills, council tax or rent arrears that people will probably have built up while waiting. The maximum percentage that can be taken out of universal credit for repayments is 40%. How is someone already trying to manage on such low income supposed to cope when such a large slice of their support is taken away at the source? And yet—in the face of all of the evidence—the Government have insisted on pressing ahead and accelerating the roll-out of universal credit since May this year, at the same time as carrying out a rapid programme of closing one in 10 jobcentres. The Government plan to increase the workload of work coaches fourfold and that of case managers sixfold as the roll-out continues. Staff are under constant pressure and are switched back and forth between processing claims and answering phone calls about problems with them.

From next year things are set to get a whole lot worse, as the Government prepare to embark on the next phase of universal credit—so-called managed migration—which will require almost 3 million people claiming the benefits that universal credit is replacing, such as tax credits and employment and support allowance, to make a new claim for universal credit instead. As hon. Members are aware, there is nothing managed about it.

Nick Thomas-Symonds (Torfaen) (Lab): Does my hon. Friend agree that one of the real issues is that, under this migration system, people who are in work are becoming worse off? How on earth can a system encourage work when it makes people in work worse off?

Margaret Greenwood: My hon. Friend hits the nail on the head; he is absolutely right to raise that issue.

The Government plan to place the entire burden on the claimants themselves to successfully make a claim, rather than the DWP automatically transferring them across. Under the Government’s regulations—as currently drafted—a letter will drop through the letterbox on to the mat, telling people that their existing claim will end and that they will have a month to make a new claim for universal credit. Labour believes that it is without precedent for a UK Government to place all the responsibility of making a claim on the millions of individuals who the Government know to be in need, putting people at risk of falling out of the system altogether. The Government are doing this despite all the evidence of the serious difficulties that people are facing when making a claim.

Dr Caroline Johnson (Sleaford and North Hykeham) (Con): Does the hon. Lady agree that one of the strengths of the system is that people apply for only one benefit under universal credit, so it is much less complex? Indeed, many people will get a benefit to which they did not previously know they were entitled.

Margaret Greenwood: When the hon. Lady looks at the drop-out rate and the number of people who actually fail to complete a claim, I think that she will probably revise the comment that she just made.

Over half the households that will be required to move across will be working families—people in work whose income is too low support them—while over a third will have been claiming ESA, which means they have been assessed by the Government as too ill or disabled to work. Just receiving the letter will be very unsettling for someone with a mental health condition or a learning difficulty.

Several hon. Members rose—

Margaret Greenwood: I am taking no more interventions.

[Interruption.] Well, I am short of time and many people have applied to speak.

Receiving the letter will also be unsettling when people have been on their existing benefit for a significant period. Of course, some people may miss the letter altogether. Also, they may well struggle to fill the form in on time and to get the necessary advice because, due
to this Government’s cuts, the advice agencies are stretched to the limit. There is provision for the deadline to be extended but many people will not be aware of that. The Government have admitted that they do not know how many people overall will need additional support to make a new claim.

The Prime Minister assured us last week that people required to transfer to universal credit would not be worse off because they will receive transitional protection—an additional payment that tops up someone’s universal credit to the same level of the benefits that they were previously receiving. However, that only lasts for two years and could be lost when someone’s circumstances change, which can include such basic life events as moving in with a partner or separating from them.

If people lose transitional protection, they will find that the support they receive under universal credit is often significantly lower. For example, there is no enhanced disability premium, which is currently claimed by over 1.4 million people, and no severe disability premium, which is claimed by another 500,000 of the most severely disabled people who live alone. There is even a danger that many of the most vulnerable will fall out of the social security system altogether and be left without any income at all. According to the latest figures, almost 30% of universal credit claims started are never completed. Do the Government not care about what happens to these people?

The Government say that universal credit will lend to greater take-up, but not if people cannot make a claim in the first place. People with low literacy skills; a learning disability or no IT access are likely to find it difficult to cope with a complex online system.

Chris Philp (Croydon South) (Con): Will the hon. Lady give way to give her voice a rest?

Margaret Greenwood: This is a really serious matter and the hon. Gentleman would do well to focus on the issue at hand.

If we translate the percentage of claims that are closed before they are completed to the nearly 3 million people the Government want to transfer across, we can see that nearly 1 million people are at risk of falling out of the social security system altogether.

Food banks are reporting that they are running out of food. In August, Department for Work and Pensions officials carried out a study to identify areas where DWP operational practices contributed to a rise in demand for food bank services. I think that any Member of the House will know the answer to that.

Ms Angela Eagle (Wallasey) (Lab): Will my hon. Friend give way?

Margaret Greenwood: I am going to make some progress.

When the National Audit Office raised the alarm with its damning report back in June, the Government misrepresented its findings and stubbornly claimed that it did not take account of changes that they had made, but they will not publish the figures that would enable the public and Parliament to hold them to account. This week in the Chamber, the Secretary of State met criticism of universal credit with accusations of scaremongering, so I will ask again: are Citizens Advice, the Child Poverty Action Group, the National Association of Welfare Rights Advisers, Mencap, Mind, Scope, Parkinson’s UK, the Residential Landlords Association, the National Housing Federation, the Resolution Foundation, the National Audit Office, the Archbishop of Canterbury and two former Prime Ministers scaremongering? The confusion of the last fortnight has caused families real concern about the transfer to universal credit and they deserve answers, so will the Government publish all reports and analysis that they have carried out into the effects of universal credit since the Secretary of State took office? People have a right to know.

The social security system should be there for any of us should we need it, yet the Government’s flagship programme has brought real hardship. How did it come to this—that people are facing hunger and destitution in the fifth largest economy in the world? It cannot be right. The Government must wake up and open their eyes to what is happening. That is why Labour Members are calling on the Government to stop the roll-out of universal credit.

1.7 pm

The Secretary of State for Work and Pensions (Ms Esther McVey): It is good to be here again to update the House on universal credit—for the third time this week. I know that many Members want to speak in this debate. I know too, Mr Speaker, that you are always anxious to hear Back Benchers speak, as am I, so I will keep my remarks as brief as possible.

I have been forthright with colleagues across the House—and in my speech at Reform earlier this year—about universal credit’s strong merits and the areas that we need to improve. In fact, in my Reform speech, I said that I would improve universal support, and I delivered on that this month. Since becoming Secretary of State, I have changed the system to provide extra support for those with severe disabilities, vulnerable young 18 to 21-year-olds and kinship carers. I am also working with colleagues to identify areas where we can make more improvements.

Mr Ranil Jayawardena (North East Hampshire) (Con): Will my right hon. Friend confirm that, although the Government will always want to do more, eight out of 10 universal credit claimants are actually satisfied with their experience, and believe that it is good and helping them into work?

Ms McVey: My hon. Friend is correct. Those are the figures and that is what people are saying. We know that universal credit is working and getting people into work because our employment figures that came out yesterday show that over 3.3 million more people are in work since 2010. So we know that we are moving forward.

Several hon. Members rose—

Ms McVey: I will continue just a little bit further.
In less than 10 months, my ministerial colleagues and I have met over 500 colleagues, charities and stakeholders. We have come to the House on 56 occasions; visited 46 jobcentres, service centres and pension centres; tabled 34 written ministerial statements; and appeared in front of Select Committees 12 times. My Department has published 637 responses to parliamentary questions, 153 pieces of guidance, 102 statistical releases, 30 research reports, and 23 consultations. We have gone to great lengths to be open.\(^1\)

\textbf{John Redwood (Wokingham) (Con):} Will the Secretary of State give way?

\textbf{Ms McVey:} I will indeed.

\textbf{John Redwood:} I am very grateful to the Secretary of State, who is doing an excellent job in improving an intrinsically good system and dealing with the little difficulties we need to sort out. Given that it is crucial that there is enough incentive for people to get into work, will she confirm that one of the improvements is to lower the rate of withdrawal so that it is more worth while to work, and will she push for that to be improved further?

\textbf{Ms McVey:} My right hon. Friend is quite correct. As he will know—and everybody in the House should know—under the legacy benefits there were punitive tax rates of over 90%. We have now brought that down to 63%. As an advocate of people who want to get into work, he is right: we should aim to get that taper rate down even further.

We also took the unusual step, earlier this year, of publishing a summary of the universal credit business case, which explained the economic case for universal credit, showing that it will help 200,000 more people into work when fully rolled out, and empower people to work 113 million extra hours.

\textbf{Tim Farron (Westmorland and Lonsdale) (LD):} Will the Secretary of State give way?

\textbf{Ms McVey:} I will indeed take a question. [\textit{Interjection.}]

\textbf{Mr Speaker:} Order. Before the hon. Gentleman intervenes, can I just point out that there are approximately 65 hon. and right hon. Members who wish to speak in this debate, and considerably less than four hours in which people can be called, so the less noise, the greater the progress.

\textbf{Tim Farron:} One in four workers in my constituency is self-employed—obviously, they are working and contributing. Is the Secretary of State aware that the minimum income floor means that many of them will be ineligible for universal credit if they cannot pay themselves the living wage in any given month? Surely we should be encouraging self-employed people, not penalising them.

\textbf{Ms McVey:} Obviously the hon. Gentleman will understand a lot about the minimum income floor because he was in the coalition when we came forward with those policies. We decided at the time that if people were not earning enough—if their business was not earning them enough and they were not on a minimum wage—we would then help them to go into work, and therefore they could have a better wage if their business was not working in that regard.

\textbf{We} published the information I mentioned alongside hundreds of reports on universal credit each year by outside bodies—indeed independent organisations like the Office for Budget Responsibility, the National Audit Office, the Institute for Fiscal Studies, the Resolution Foundation, the House of Commons Library, and numerous others. So we are open with our information.

\textbf{Several hon. Members:} Will the Secretary of State give way?

\textbf{Ms McVey:} I will indeed give way. Who shall I choose from this merry bunch?

\textbf{Stephen Timms (East Ham) (Lab):} One of the representations the Secretary of State will have received is from the Residential Landlords Association saying that a majority of its members are now not willing to let accommodation to universal credit claimants because they quickly get into arrears and cannot pay the rent. Is she proposing some change to address that specific problem?

\textbf{Ms McVey:} As the right hon. Gentleman will know, we have made various changes to make sure that we can pay direct to the landlords—that we can give alternative payments. It is only right that we do that. However, when we talk about the difficulties that claimants have got into, it is good to look at the legacy benefits and Labour’s track record. Between 1997 and 2010, benefits claimants’ debt to local authorities increased by £1.8 billion through overpayment and errors in the legacy system. On tax credits, introduced by the Opposition, claimants got into £5.86 billion-worth of debt through error and overpayments. That is a shameful record from the Opposition.

\textbf{Several hon. Members:} Will the Secretary of State give way?

\textbf{Ms McVey:} Let me get back to the independent reports, what is happening, and what is being made publicly available. We are learning from the evidence, building on that evidence, and making decisions so that we can improve the system as it goes further. [\textit{Hon. Members: “Give way!”}] The power to choose who is going to get a question!

\textbf{Chris Philp:} Is not the real way to combat poverty to get people off benefits and into work, is not the evidence that people on universal credit are more likely to go back into work than people on the old benefits, and is not that the real test of this system’s success?

\textbf{Neil Coyle (Bermondsey and Old Southwark) (Lab):} Will the Secretary of State give way?

\textbf{Ms McVey:} My hon. Friend is exactly right. That is what Conservative Members agree about: helping people into work. For us, getting—[\textit{Interruption.}]

\textbf{Mr Speaker:} Order. I say to the hon. Member for Bermondsey and Old Southwark (Neil Coyle), whose grinning countenance belies an aggressiveness of spirit in this matter, that it is not really in order to yell out, “On the same point,” as a way of trying to ensure that one is called.

\textbf{Neil Coyle:} I am trying to stand out from the crowd.


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Mr Speaker: Believe me, the hon. Gentleman does that perfectly satisfactorily in any case.

Ms McVey: Conservative Members have made sure that since 2010, 1,000 each and every day have got a job. I want to give out a very, very important statistic that came out yesterday—youth unemployment has fallen by 50% since this Government have been in office. That is thousands of young people with a future that this Government have given them.

Neil Coyle: Will the Secretary of State give way?

Ms McVey: I will indeed.

Frank Field (Birkenhead) (Ind): On a point of order, Mr Speaker.

Neil Coyle: I am really grateful to the Secretary of State—

Mr Speaker: Order. Before we hear from the hon. Gentleman—I am sure that his intervention will not be aggressive—we have a point of order from Frank Field.

Frank Field: On a point of order, Mr Speaker. As the Secretary of State is finding it so hard to see which Opposition Members are standing up wishing to intervene, might she use her glasses to recognise those of us who are doing so?

Mr Speaker: I did not have any impression that the Secretary of State was having any particular difficulty; I think she was spoilt for choice and taking a little while to exercise her choice. But we are always grateful for the right hon. Gentleman’s advice, solicited or otherwise. [Interruption.] Well, I am not going to comment on the glasses situation—it is rather beyond the ken of the Speaker. However, we note the right hon. Gentleman’s well intentioned advice.

Neil Coyle: The Secretary of State is making her usual robust case and claims that the system has improved. Why is it, then, that the Department acknowledges that thousands of landlords, especially private sector landlords, will never be part of the landlord portal; that the Government have had to exempt supported housing fully from universal credit; that 300,000 people will get late payments this year, according to the Department; and that underpayments and overpayments are increasing under universal credit to levels not seen with the legacy benefits?

Ms McVey: To be fair, 76% of people coming on to universal credit had arrears in their housing benefit, according to the report by the National Federation of ALMOs. That is the reality of it. I have given the figures for the extra debt people got into under the previous Labour Government.

Some very interesting speeches were given in the House in 2016, when people understood that we had to get the benefits bill down. This is what was said on the Floor of the House:

“The deficit has to be eliminated. We believe in controlling the cost of social security so that it is fair”

on “the people who are paying for it”—[Official Report, 20 July 2015; Vol. 598, c. 1265].

Ms McVey: My hon. Friend is right that unemployment has fallen by more than half in the north-west. I am surprised that the hon. Member for Wirral West (Margaret Greenwood) did not know that, but, then again, the Opposition are not always too hot on their figures.

I want to give another important piece of information. Labour’s position on the Welfare Reform and Work Bill in 2016 was, through the Labour Whip, to abstain on the changes. Some of them broke the Whip, but the position was to abstain, and this is why: in 1997-98, the welfare cost per household was £5,603 but, by 2010-11, when Labour left office, that figure had gone up to £8,350—up by nearly £3,000 per household. That was why everybody agreed in principle that universal credit was the way forward and that we had to get the benefit bill under control.

Toby Perkins (Chesterfield) (Lab): The Secretary of State pointedly remarked at the start of her contribution that this is the third time she has had to come to the House just this week. Does that not tell her how badly these reforms are going? We are all receiving hundreds of representations, and few of her own party’s Members are willing to turn up to support her. Is it true that, at the end of the debate, she will not have the confidence to ask her Members of Parliament to vote against the motion, because she knows that many of them agree with it?

Ms McVey: I thank the hon. Gentleman for his kindly words and advice but, when the Division comes, we will see what happens. I am convinced that Government Back Benchers know how many millions more people we have got into work. I am convinced that they know that 1 million more disabled people will end up with more money under universal credit. That is what this is about—supporting the most vulnerable claimants.

Vicky Ford (Chelmsford) (Con): Will the Secretary of State give way?

Ms McVey: I will.

Toby Perkins: On a point of order, Mr Speaker. I wonder whether you could provide advice. I understand that it is a matter of record whether the Government intend to vote for something. I have asked the Secretary of State specifically whether the Government will vote against the motion. Is it reasonable to ask that question?

Mr Speaker: It is perfectly reasonable for somebody to ask, and the Secretary of State can answer if she wishes or not if she does not, but there is no breach of
order in there not being a declaration of intent on that matter at this stage in the debate. At what point it becomes clear that there will or will not be a Division remains to be seen, but nothing disorderly has occurred. We were about to hear an intervention from Vicky Ford.

**Vicky Ford:** Does my right hon. Friend agree that protecting the most vulnerable is key? Can she reconfirm that over 1 million disabled households will be over £100 a month better off and that it is the Government’s policy to continue to work for improvements, to protect the vulnerable?

**Ms McVey:** I am glad that there was some calm and hush for that question, so that I could hear it and give the response that it deserves. My hon. Friend is right: around 1 million disabled households will receive on average around £110 more per month through universal credit. If we were to follow the advice of the Labour party, those 1 million disabled households would be £110 worse off per month. That is what the Opposition are asking for.

Universal credit pays for 85% of childcare costs, compared with 70% under the legacy benefits. Because it is a simpler benefit, as I hear from Government Back Benchers, 700,000 households will get entitlements that they were not claiming under legacy benefits, worth an average of £285 per month.

We have taken a mature approach to rolling out universal credit. We have said that we will test, learn, adapt and change as we go forward. That has resulted in a series of improvements, and I will read some of those out. We are providing extra universal support with Citizens Advice, an independent and trusted partner. We have brought in the landlord portal. We have brought in alternative payment arrangements, 100% advances and housing running costs. We have removed waiting days and are providing extra support for kinship carers and those receiving the severe disability premium.

**Ruth Cadbury** (Brentford and Isleworth) (Lab): Do the Government recognise that, in constituencies such as mine in London, work does not pay the rent for most people, because rent levels in the private sector are almost equal to take-home pay? Universal credit is therefore essential. The majority of claimants in my constituency are working. Do the Government recognise the problems with pay-outs, delays and so on, particularly for people whose income changes from month to month, and will the system recognise the needs of the many working families in high-rent accommodation?

**Ms McVey:** I thank the hon. Lady for her question. Those are all things that we have to consider, in terms of how payments are made and how they work for the person in work. That is what we are doing, and that is why we have had a slow and measured roll-out. That was one of the things I said in my reform speech, if she cared to listen to it.

I would like to point out the news yesterday that we have seen the strongest wage growth for nine years. That is what this Government are doing—getting people into work and turning the corner of more wage growth. We will continue to roll out universal credit, and we will engage with colleagues across the House. I met the right hon. Member for Birkenhead (Frank Field) yesterday—I think he saw me with my glasses on then, which is maybe why he felt the need to mention that—and I will meet him again. My door is always open. We will make sure we get this benefit right, and Government Back Benchers, who have genuine concerns, want to get it right.

**Several hon. Members rose—**

**Ms McVey:** I will give way one final time.

**Heidi Allen** (South Cambridgeshire) (Con): I want to express the view of Government Back Benchers on the motion. We believe genuinely that the Secretary of State is listening to what needs to change with universal credit, which makes a mockery of the motion, and not a single one of us, myself included, will vote for it.

**Ms McVey:** I thank my hon. Friend. Friend for those kind words. She has fought tirelessly to make sure that universal credit is the best system possible. Like all our party’s Back Benchers, she is not scaremongering but wants to help people into work and make sure that work pays.

**Several hon. Members rose—**

**Mr Speaker:** Order. I thank the Secretary of State for what she has said. Before I call the spokesman for the Scottish National party, I remind the House that in excess of 65 Members wish to speak in the debate, and therefore there is a premium upon brevity, and the starting time limit for Back-Bench speeches will be five minutes each. I remind the House also that interventions should be brief. If Members want to know what the textbook is, they can consult the right hon. Members for New Forest West (Sir Desmond Swayne) and for Wokingham (John Redwood), to give but two examples, although the book may by now be out of print.

1.28 pm

**Neil Gray** (Airdrie and Shotts) (SNP): Mr Speaker, I will of course endeavour quickly to get through what I have to say in the protected time I have been given.

I very much thank the Labour party for using some of its Opposition day time to bring the subject of universal credit back to the House. We will support the motion this afternoon. However, for maximum pressure to be exerted on the Chancellor ahead of the Budget, we are calling on Labour and Tory Back-Bench MPs to work with us to make the case for the investment in universal credit that is desperately needed to make it work. The papers called for in the motion are required to be published fully to inform the political and civic debate in the country ahead of the Budget. We know what the expert groups are telling us. I imagine they are telling UK Ministers, too, so to what extent are they being listened to?

In some ways, we have the wrong Minister sitting on the Treasury Bench this afternoon. The Secretary of State for Work and Pensions has suggested that she has already made the case to the Chancellor for further investment in universal credit. We do not know how much she has asked for and for what purpose she wants those cuts reversed, but that is now for the Chancellor.
Universal credit is already causing misery to millions. The Chancellor should be here to hear that, not just the Secretary of State.

There has been much rumour over recent days about what the UK Government’s plan for universal credit is, with some reports suggesting a delay to the roll-out until 2023. The Minister for Employment said yesterday that he does not comment on rumour, but when I asked him to circumvent that rumour by detailing the plans in the House, he came back with the same “flat-earth rhetoric” that was described by the BBC’s Michael Buchanan as his experience of talking to UK Ministers about universal credit.

Ms Angela Eagle: Does the hon. Gentleman share my puzzlement at the experience of those of us in our constituencies where we have had universal credit rolled out and we have seen increases in food bank usage—in my own area, of 34%, which is 30 tonnes of extra food—and does he share my worry that the Government do not seem to understand that this demonstrates there is a real problem with this benefit?

Neil Gray: I absolutely take what the hon. Lady has said, and I think she is absolutely right. At the weekend, the UK Health Secretary claimed that he had not received any correspondence on universal credit, only—three hours later—for the Mirror’s Dan Bloom to prove that was inaccurate as he had received an email from a constituent in West Suffolk just three days earlier. I will take with a lorry load of salt Conservative Members saying that they have had no problems with universal credit in their areas.

Let us be clear: even if the rumours are true, just delaying the roll-out will do nothing to sort out the problems people are facing with universal credit right now, such as in Airdrie and Shotts; it will only delay the inevitable for others. It will not solve the misery that is soon to be thrust on people in Aberdeen, Edinburgh and Glasgow. The only way to sort out those problems is by accepting that a significant investment needs to be made in universal credit at the Budget so that radical change can follow.

The biggest problem with universal credit is that, for years, it has been an all-consuming cash cow for Treasury cuts to social security. George Osborne’s 2015 Budget and the subsequent Welfare Reform and Work Act 2016 cut universal credit to ribbons. Everyone’s memory of the Budget in 2015 was George Osborne’s U-turn on tax credits, but as we and others warned then, that U-turn did not cover universal credit and the cuts were engrained but to be seen another day. For the many Tory MPs who thought George Osborne’s U-turn was enough, that day of reckoning is soon to arrive.

Frank Field: Before the hon. Gentleman finishes his speech, will he address the question that I wanted to ask the Secretary of State during her contribution: can we not have the roll-out until all these difficulties have been dealt with, so that we can safely ensure that each and every one of our constituents will not be messed around in the terrible way so many of them have been?

Neil Gray: The right hon. Gentleman will of course know that that has been SNP policy for some years, and I hope the Minister will be listening.

Angela Crawley (Lanark and Hamilton East) (SNP): This week, South Lanarkshire Council informed employees that they could lose their universal credit over the Christmas period simply because they are paid four-weekly. Does the hon. Gentleman agree that this is yet another example of the shambles around universal credit, and will he urge the Secretary of State to do everything in her power to ensure that low-paid staff at South Lanarkshire Council are not penalised this Christmas?

Neil Gray: I absolutely agree with my hon. Friend. She is absolutely right, and I will be coming on to that point later in my speech.

Stewart Hosie (Dundee East) (SNP): Will my hon. Friend give way?

Neil Gray: For the last time, I will give way.

Stewart Hosie: My hon. Friend is making a very good speech. I am advised by one of my housing associations that every tenant—every single one—who has been moved on to universal credit so far has either gone into rent arrears or has seen their rent arrears rise. May I urge my hon. Friend to continue to press not simply for more money for universal credit, but for a complete halt to the roll-out and a complete redesign of the system?

Neil Gray: I agree with my hon. Friend, and as a result, he may enjoy the conclusion of my speech.

Tommy Sheppard (Edinburgh East) (SNP): Will my hon. Friend give way?

Neil Gray: I will give again later, but I will make some progress now.

When universal credit is thrust on people, it is catastrophic. The Secretary of State said as much last week. For many people on universal credit, incomes will fall by £2,400 a year, which is £200 a month or £50 per week. The Child Poverty Action Group estimates that taking all working age social security cuts together since 2010, they reach £37 billion. The benefit freeze is the single biggest cut, as support has failed to match rent or inflation rises for years. Over the decade, this will cost the poorest 10% of households over 10% of their income, and by far the worst hit are families with children and particularly those with more than two children.

Some 500,000 disabled people have lost £30 per week from the ESA work-related activity component cut, while 100,000 disabled children and 230,000 severely disabled adults will also have their money cut via universal credit. Bringing that together, the CPAG estimates that a single parent with a disabled child is set to lose £10,000 from tax and benefit reforms this decade. That should bring shame on every single Government Member. We cannot sit back and allow that to continue; we have to act for proper change. This does not need tinkering at the edges, but fundamental reform.

Mhairi Black (Paisley and Renfrewshire South) (SNP): Talking about the incredible losses under this policy, is it not tremendously that the Scottish Government are continually being asked by the UK Government to mitigate the policies and mistakes this UK Government have made and that Scotland never even voted for?
Neil Gray: As ever, my hon. Friend is absolutely right. The Scottish Government have already spent £400 million mitigating the Tory mess on social security. We have used flexibilities on universal credit to make the system better, but we cannot be expected to fill the gaps forever; the change has to happen at source.

Chris Philip: Is the hon. Gentleman aware that total spending on benefits relating to disabled people stands at about £50 billion a year and that it has gone up considerably in real terms? Since 2010, spending in total has gone up, not down.

Neil Gray: The hon. Gentleman has completely ignored the points I mentioned that have been made by the CPAG and other expert groups. He has completely ignored that. Government Members are deaf to the facts.

There are of course some cheerleaders for the version of universal credit before us. There are those who say nothing needs to be changed, and those whose loyalty makes them blind to reality. They continually say it gets people into work, but the National Audit Office has explicitly said that this claim is absolute patent nonsense. Page 10 of its report states: “The Department will never be able to measure whether Universal Credit actually leads to 200,000 more people in work, because it cannot isolate the effect of Universal Credit from other economic factors in increasing employment.”

I would love to hear the evidence that directly correlates universal credit alone as the factor in increasing employment.

Debbie Abrahams (Oldham East and Saddleworth) (Lab): Is the hon. Gentleman concerned, as I am, by the fact that not only the NAO but the Universities of York and of Glasgow have shown, in a two-year study, that there is no evidence universal credit actually gets people into work and still less that it improves in-work progression? The Government continually misrepresent these facts. Is he concerned, as I am, about their doing this?

Neil Gray: I completely agree with the hon. Lady. It is great to have her contribution, which should be listened to across this House.

Alan Brown (Kilmarnock and Loudoun) (SNP): I could not get an answer to this yesterday. On the fact that the Government cannot prove that universal credit gets people into work, the number of claimants in my constituency is 930 higher than a year ago, which is an increase of 54%. The Library now confirms that we cannot make comparisons between one constituency and another where universal credit has been rolled out. It is a total sham, and there is no way to measure this.

Neil Gray: My hon. Friend is absolutely right. On making work pay, the CPAG says that rewards from work are limited. A single person on the minimum wage would have to work full time for an extra two months in the year just to make up for the cuts—I would love to hear Work and Pensions Ministers explain how 14 months goes into 12—because the taper rate for work allowances makes those who are on universal credit the most highly taxed workers in the UK, at 63%. For every £1 earned, 63p is clawed back. That needs to be changed.

Several hon. Members rose—

Neil Gray: I will make some progress, to allow other Members to speak. [Interruption.] The Secretary of State ignored my colleagues the entire time she was speaking, so it is only fair that I allow them to contribute to the debate.

We should also take with a lorry load of salt any claims from those cheerleaders on the Tory Benches who say, “Universal credit has been rolled out in my area and everything is fine,” after the UK Health Secretary’s embarrassment at the weekend.

Several hon. Members rose—

Neil Gray: No, I need to make some progress.

I have had dozens of emails about universal credit from constituents over the past few days, in the run-up to this debate. One was Leeanne from Salsburgh. She is unable to work but volunteers at her local citizens advice bureau, so she, too, is seeing at first hand the misery of universal credit. She says that it is having a major impact on the food bank she attends weekly to help to give advice. She wants the message to get across and for this change to happen.

John McNally (Falkirk) (SNP): In my constituency office we have had 10 new UC cases already this month—we receive about 20 to 30 a month, and that is just from those people who know to come to their MP. People are being left in poverty and having to go through an appeals process just to obtain what they are entitled to. While they appeal the DWP decision, they can be left with no money at all. People regularly wait hours on the phone to solve problems, and being able to put food on the table is literally a matter of survival. Does my hon. Friend agree that this delay is another admission?

Neil Gray: My hon. Friend is absolutely right. That is why we need to call for the changes to follow as quickly as possible.

At my surgeries, I have met constituents desperate for help with universal credit. I will give just two examples. The first is Shelby Bowman from Airdrie, who has become a casualty of the disgraceful two-child cap. Shelby gave birth to her daughter, her third child, after the roll-out of universal credit locally—she was due to give birth before the roll-out but was late. Shelby has now been migrated on to universal credit, and it has cost her thousands of pounds. She has been told that the two-child limit, which did not apply to the childcare element of tax credits, now kicks in for universal credit. She returned to work just two weeks after giving birth, to provide for her three children, who are aged two and under. She worked as a dental assistant during the day and for Domino’s at night. The two-child cap in universal credit has made it impossible for her to work. After I raised the case with the Secretary of State on Monday, Shelby has been told that she can get support with childcare costs but has to pay up front and then be reimbursed. She therefore has to find £2,000. That is just ludicrous and highlights why the two-child cap is discriminatory, unfair, a barrier to work and needs to go.

Another constituent at one of my Friday surgeries highlighted how universal credit completely fails to support people with mental health conditions. Her son Jordon, from Airdrie, is currently receiving acute mental
health treatment but needs his universal credit application to progress, for obvious reasons. Jordon’s mental health condition is such that he is in crisis and in hospital.

Madam Deputy Speaker (Dame Rosie Winterton): Order.

Neil Gray: With respect, Madam Deputy Speaker, I have protected time and there is a great deal that needs to be said in this debate. I will do my best to get through it as quickly as possible.

Madam Deputy Speaker: Order. I am simply pointing out that a lot of Members wish to speak, and that the hon. Gentleman has now been speaking for longer than the official Opposition Front Bench.

Neil Gray: The Opposition Front Bencher obviously made a decision about the length of their speech, and I am doing my best to get through what I have to say.

Yet jobcentre staff told Jordon's mum that his claim could not continue until he signed his claimant commitment. I think it is important that Members listen to this, because I am talking about someone with an acute mental health condition. If he did not sign, he would have to apply for jobs from his hospital bed if he was to avoid a sanction. At what level is that not an abuse? I am not criticising jobcentre staff; they do the very best they can while implementing a disastrous policy from this UK Government. I suggest that the experience of frontline jobcentre staff rather differs from what Ministers would have us believe.

Universal credit, in its current form, is doing real damage to individuals and families. It is not just me saying that; experts are calling for change. The Joseph Rowntree Foundation says that cuts announced in 2015 will mean that 3.2 million households will typically be around £50 a week worse off on universal credit compared with tax credits.

Policy in Practice said this month that almost two in five households on universal credit will lose an average of £52 a week and that some 2.8 million households will see their income cut. Gingerbread says that the cuts to work allowances mean that the average single parent will lose £800 a year, and some will lose £2,000. Figures from the Office for National Statistics suggest that 91% of single parents are women, so they are being disproportionately affected once again. Trussell Trust data from March shows that in areas of full universal credit roll-out foodbank use was up by 52%, whereas analysis of food banks in places yet to receive the roll-out showed the rise to be 13%.

SHELTER Scotland submitted evidence to the Scottish Parliament’s Local Government and Communities Committee last year, stating that the UK Government’s “ongoing roll out of Universal Credit, the benefit cap reduction and the capping of housing benefits…directly threaten tenancies and risk pushing more people into homelessness.”

Other expert groups are demanding change, including the Resolution Foundation, Macmillan Cancer Support, Together for Short Lives—I could go on and on. The Scottish Government are using what limited powers they have to influence change, but as I have already said, we cannot continue to mitigate the mess forever.

So what needs to change? At the Budget, the Chancellor should start by investing to lift the benefit freeze, restore work allowances, scrap the two-child limit, lift the application waiting time, reduce the clawback from advances, sort the self-employed income floor, cut sanctions and restore the ESA work-related activity group and the disability components of UC. There should then be a halt to the roll-out until a fundamental review of universal credit is carried out, which should look at areas such as the digital-only approach, implicit consent, introducing split payments, rethinking the way people with mental health problems interact with the system and fixing the problems with the assessment period.

The problems with universal credit are fundamental and are causing misery, but they are problems that can be fixed with political will. This afternoon is the first test of that political will. We need to see the Government’s analysis and the papers should be released. When that confirms what we all know, this House should unite and force the desperately needed change.

1.46 pm

Mr Mark Harper (Forest of Dean) (Con): I want to start my remarks by noting the presence of my right hon. Friend the Member for Chingford and Woodford Green (Mr Duncan Smith), whose decision to drive through this policy was very far-sighted. He was motivated by a desire to make the benefit system fundamentally focus on enabling people to get into work and to make sure that work pays. I think that is incredibly important, and I will say more about that later in my remarks.

I suspect that many of the Members who will speak in the debate will compare the situation under universal credit with some mythical universe of perfection where there are no problems. I was first elected to the House in 2005, in the aftermath of the introduction of tax credits. They had been introduced with a big bang, which was a disaster. Nearly half the recipients were paid the wrong amount of money—nearly £2,000,000,000 was paid in error. I had constituents who had been reassured over and over again that the money was theirs to spend, but then Her Majesty’s Revenue and Customs came to take it away. I had constituents in tears at my surgery. Let us not pretend that the legacy benefit system is perfect, because that is not what we are comparing universal credit with; we are comparing it with a legacy benefit system that is flawed and needs to be improved.

Ruth George (High Peak) (Lab): Does the right hon. Gentleman not agree that the problems with tax credit overpayments resulted from a low excess income level, which was then raised by the Labour Government to £5,000 a year, meaning that we did not get overpayments? The previous Government reduced it back to £1,000, so we are again seeing overpayments because people earn more. That is the problem: we had a Government that did listen and learn, and now we have one that will not.

Mr Harper: I was in the House at the time, and I am afraid that the Government were pushed into action and threw huge amounts of taxpayers’ money around in a way that did not target the problem.

Several hon. Members rose—
Mr Harper: No, I have made that point and want now to move on to the design of the system.

For me, the biggest advantage of the universal credit system is that it gets rid of the hours caps on what people can earn and the reduction in the withdrawal of benefit. The hon. Member for Airdrie and Shotts (Neil Gray), who speaks for the Scottish National party, talked about taper rates and the reduction of benefit as people earn money. He is right about that, but what he forgets to say is that under the legacy benefit system that withdrawal of benefit could be up to 90%. It meant that it was not worth people—[Interruption.]

Hannah Bardell (Livingston) (SNP): Will the right hon. Gentleman give way?

Mr Harper: We do not have very much time to speak. I am afraid the SNP Front Bencher took up a huge amount of time, so I am not going to take any more interventions from the SNP. He spoke for longer than the official Opposition.

We have reduced the effective tax rate for people on benefits from up to 90% to 63%. It was 65% to start off with and we were able to reduce that.

The second important point is that for many people on benefits who had hours caps, jobs had to be designed not around the needs of businesses or individuals, but around the needs of the benefit system. My experience when I was a Minister in the Department for Work and Pensions was of meeting businesses that designed jobs around the needs of their business. However, when they took on a fantastic employee who did a great job and then wanted to increase their hours and offer that person increased opportunities to earn a living, that person had to say, “I’m terribly sorry. I can’t take that promotion or those hours because it will put at risk my benefits and I will not be able to guarantee a roof over our head for my children.” That has changed and that is a radical improvement.

Heidi Allen: For the record, I was one of those employers, and I got very frustrated that I could not give more hours to people working for me. On the taper rate, the situation is better than it was. Given the choice, I would restore the taper rate to 50%, where it was originally designed to be. Does my right hon. Friend agree that if we are going to have to choose wisely where to spend money, we should pump money into work allowances for those claimants most adversely affected? That is where we should focus money on in this Budget.

Mr Harper: I agree with my hon. Friend. Friend that if the Chancellor is able to find some money—I always think it is very good to not try to write the Chancellor’s Budget in advance—the work allowances are an area to prioritise. I know that that is what my right hon. Friend the Member for Chingford and Woodford Green thinks, too. I am sure the Chancellor will have heard the call in the letter that he wrote and in the debate today from my hon. Friend. Getting rid of the hours caps is really important. It means that jobs can be better focused on individuals and that we give people the opportunity to get into work, progress in work, and be able to earn for their families.

The final point I want to make in the one and a half minutes I have left—I will not take any more interventions, because it takes time away from other Members—is on the experience of constituents. I still get constituents writing to me about universal credit—of course I do. But in the past year, since we rolled out universal credit in my constituency, I get about half the number that I once did. I now get about half the number of problems that I used to get with the legacy benefit system.

I also want to take this opportunity—I hope the Secretary of State can take this back to the Department—to say that of course when one is rolling out a benefit system to millions of people there will be errors, but the experience of my constituency staff is that when we raise those issues with the Department it looks at them properly and we get considered, detailed responses to solve them for my constituents. The members of staff in the Department are very focused on doing their best for our constituents. I certainly had the experience—I have heard the Minister of State say this as well—from when I was in the Department of frontline staff saying that the introduction of universal credit was the first time they felt they could do what they came to work at the Department for, which is to help constituents get into work, earn more money and be able to provide for their families. That is a fantastic thing and I urge the Secretary of State to continue to roll out the benefit in a careful way.

1.53 pm

Shabana Mahmood (Birmingham, Ladywood) (Lab): I should not really be shocked. I have been an MP for long enough and I have heard the rhetoric from the Government for long enough not to be shocked. I have to say, however, that listening to the Secretary of State today, and the tenor of the interventions and comments we have heard from some Government Members, beggars belief. Their approach is utterly divorced from reality. This programme was supposed to be about so-called compassionate conservatism. If the Government really believed the rhetoric behind the programme when they set it up—that it was about making work pay and all those high ideals—they, and the Secretary of State in particular, would show some humility in their approach to the debate.

Clearly, the Secretary of State has made the political decision to front this out while our constituents are being forced to live in misery and face destitution. That is not compassionate, that is not humane and that is not moral. I urge the Secretary of State to reflect on the attitude she is displaying to the House, our constituents and the country in the way that she is approaching this debate, because it is not acceptable. It flies in the face of the rhetoric the Government themselves use. What they are doing today is unbelievable.

Chris Philp: Will the hon. Lady give way?

Shabana Mahmood: I will not.

It is not unusual for Government programmes to run into trouble. I am a member of the Public Accounts Committee and it is our bread-and-butter work every week to look at Government programmes that run into difficulties. A Government who cared about a programme—one that is not a vehicle for cuts and is not designed to force people to have less money than the system it is replacing—would actually engage properly and genuinely to learn lessons and make the programme better. Instead, the Government said that talk of cuts was somehow
fake news. The Secretary of State then had to admit that people are going to be worse off. We have heard the figures of £200 a month and £2,400 a year being mooted. That is a staggering sum of money to lose every year for the working poor and the vulnerable in our community. We know that the self-employed will potentially be up to £2,500 a year worse off compared with those who are not self-employed under the new system. These are the realities that the Government cannot deny. That is not fake news; that is just the truth.

The Government and the DWP said to the National Audit Office—this was recorded in its most recent report—that the organisations at the coalface of helping our constituents to deal with the troubles they face because of universal credit, whether the Trussell Trust, other people who run food banks or local government, which is now facing much higher levels of rent arrears than previously, are motivated by a desire to lobby for changes rather than accurately reflect what is happening on the ground. That is a disgraceful attitude for the Department to take towards organisations that, yes, may well have a different vision for how they think the social security system should work, but are absolutely telling the truth about the destitution and difficulties our constituents are facing.

I invite the Secretary of State and any of her Ministers to come and spend a day in my constituency office and to see the explosion in our case load that has been created by the roll-out of universal credit. My staff spend most of their time every single day on the phone trying to sort out difficulties arising from universal credit. I shall highlight just two cases we have had recently, the first regarding delayed payments. The Government say they are taking action on that, but I recently, the first regarding delayed payments. The

The Minister for Employment (Alok Sharma): I thank the hon. Lady for taking an intervention. What I say to her, and I have said this before in the House, is that if there are individual cases Members should bring them for taking an intervention. What I say to him about where he should get some credit. I shall highlight just two cases we have had recently, the first regarding delayed payments. The Government say they are taking action on that, but I recently, the first regarding delayed payments. The

Shabana Mahmood: I wish it was just one case. I would happily bring them all to the Minister and he can tell me how I should respond to my constituents, but my experience of engaging with the Department on this matter is not a happy one. If he wants to become the constituency caseworker for the whole of the House for universal credit cases, he will be a very busy man. In fact, it would be easier for him to improve the system and fund it properly so that people are not forced into destitution in the first place.

There is a particular difficulty in my constituency relating to constituents with autism and other mental health conditions moving on to universal credit, often because they have failed the assessment—they had previously been in receipt of employment and support allowance—having not been supported as they tried to navigate a very complicated online system. The supply that is available is simply not enough. I invite the Government and the Minister, in that spirit, to revisit some of those issues, because they are not ones that he will be hearing from me for the first time.

In this context, it beggars belief that the Government wish to continue with managed migration. There is only one fair, humane and compassionate thing that they could do for all the people facing difficulty under the system: stop the roll-out and try to genuinely engage and fix the problems of universal credit right now, before they move on. Most importantly, however, they need to fund it properly, because this is a vehicle for cuts—they know it, we all know it, and our constituents are paying the price for it.

Gordon Henderson (Sittingbourne and Sheppey) (Con): My constituency has been operating the universal credit full service since January this year, so I like to think that I know something about what is being delivered at a grassroots level and the effect it is having on my constituents who claim it.

Let me begin by saying that UC is not perfect, but nor is any benefits system that we have ever had in this country. UC replaced a legacy system that was deeply flawed and offered no incentive for people to work. It is true to say that despite a number of improvements that have been made to UC since its roll-out started, it still has a number of faults, which I will come to later. However, it is certainly not the disaster caricatured by right hon. and hon. Members on the Opposition Benches. For some time, the Labour party has been busy whipping up opposition to UC, criticising it at every opportunity. These continual criticisms are not only a metaphorical two-fingered insult to the incredibly hard-working staff in my local DWP offices—they are delivering an excellent service to my constituents—but are misleading the public and frightening some very vulnerable people.

Of course, the introduction of any system can be problematic. I, too, had concerns about how it would affect people in my area when it was rolled out, so I visited my local jobcentres and sat down with the staff to go through their plans with them to ensure that none of the claimants moving from the legacy system to UC would be disadvantaged. I was impressed by the commitment and enthusiasm of the staff and was satisfied that they would be prioritising the most vulnerable claimants.

At the time, I urged staff to contact me should they come into contact with anybody they were unable to help because of the system, and I promised to take up those problems with DWP Ministers. No such problems have been referred to me by the jobcentres.

Alex Chalk (Cheltenham) (Con): I went along to the Jobcentre Plus in Cheltenham and I had the same experience as my hon. Friend. Staff were enthusiastic about the benefits that it was creating, accurately, people in work were, on average, receiving an additional £600 a year. Does he not agree that that important factor should be weighed in this conversation?
Gordon Henderson: Yes, that is an important factor. I also point out that Opposition Members often quote concerns raised by citizens advice bureaux about the impact of UC on local people. Well, I visited my local citizens advice bureaux and suggested that they work closely with my office to identify people with a problem, so that they could be helped. I did the same thing with a local church group that contacted me expressing concerns about UC. In addition, I used social media to ask people to contact me if they were facing difficulties because of UC, or if they knew of somebody facing difficulties. I have had only a handful of people referred to me since we went live in January and all the problems raised were resolved quickly by my staff.

The Opposition have also made much of the use of food banks, and I want to touch on that issue. My first experience of food banks in my constituency was when our local steelworks closed down and some workers were left without any money to buy food for their families. There was a long delay in getting those people the financial help that they needed and to which they were entitled. That delay did not arise under UC, but under the legacy benefit system. We hear repeated claims from Opposition Members that the transition to UC has forced more people to use food banks, so to check their claims, I went to visit a food bank in my constituency last week to find out for myself. [Interruption.] The volunteers who run that food bank are wonderful people for whom I have the utmost respect, as are the volunteers in the other food banks in my constituency.

Heidi Allen: I hope that my friends in the Opposition will forgive me for saying this, but everybody in the Chamber genuinely wants to get UC right, and I would rather that Opposition Members did not belittle my hon. Friend, who is genuinely trying to do his best to find out what is happening in his constituency.

Gordon Henderson: As my hon. Friend will understand, the claim is being made that some people who use those food banks were forced to do so because of the difficulties faced when claiming UC. When I pressed them about those difficulties, they said that one was the requirement for claims to be made online, which was also raised by the shadow Secretary of State. Some people claimed that they either were not computer literate or did not have access to a computer.

Neil Coyle: Will the hon. Gentleman give way?

Gordon Henderson: I will not give way again because I do not have time. I pointed out that such people could visit the local jobcentre, where they would be able to use one of the bank of computers installed there. In addition, they would be helped to navigate the system by a member of staff or a volunteer from one of the voluntary organisations that are now based in the jobcentre.

Of course, there were people who faced other difficulties, so I asked the food bank to provide me with details of those people so that I could get somebody to contact them to investigate and take up their cases with the DWP. When we received that information, we discovered that many of the people were living in a local hostel that provides temporary accommodation for homeless adults. A member of my staff contacted the people concerned and it soon became obvious that some of them suffered from underlying problems that affected their ability to manage the transition to UC, and that forced them into using the food bank. Those problems included drug addiction, alcoholism, mental health problems, an inability to manage money, or plain fecklessness. Automatically blaming their problems on UC, which is what the Opposition appear to be doing, is doing those people no favours. If somehow the delivery of UC could be made perfect overnight, that would not make people any less dependent on drugs or alcohol. It would not solve their mental health problems. It would not help them to manage their money better and it would not make them less feckless. Of course, we have to do something to help those people, but the truth is that they would still have the same problems, whatever benefits system was put in place.

Luckily, such people are in the minority. However, there are some people who have genuine concerns, which leads me nicely on to the faults in the system that I mentioned at the beginning of my speech. My No. 1 concern is the five weeks’ delay in the receipt of the first benefit payment made under UC. I urge the Department to look at whether there is a way in which that can be phased in over a longer period. Of course, people can get an advance payment from food banks, so to check their claims. I went to visit a food bank in my constituency last week to find out for myself. [Interruption.] The volunteers who run that food bank are wonderful people for whom I have the utmost respect, as are the volunteers in the other food banks in my constituency.

The second problem is the repayment requirement for an advance payment. That is something else I would like the Department to look at to see whether it could be done over a two-year, rather than a one-year, period. The third problem is that under the legacy system, claimants were provided with a letter confirming what benefits they were receiving. Under UC, that is not provided and I would like that to be changed if possible. The final thing, which I have taken up with the NHS, is that there is no box for UC on the back of prescriptions, and I would like that to change as well.

2.8 pm

Ms Angela Eagle (Wallasey) (Lab): Universal credit is causing undeniable and massive hardship in my constituency. I see it in my advice surgery, and we see it in the 34% increase in food bank usage in the Wirral since the full roll-out of universal credit. When we talked to the Trussell Trust, which provides the 15 food banks in the Wirral, it said that half of all the usage of food banks in the area is a direct result of the problems with universal credit.

The DWP is under huge pressure to deliver a huge change programme, which was badly designed to begin with and which the previous Chancellor took huge amounts of money out of—there were £4 billion of cuts. It is trying to deliver a change programme and save vast amounts of public money at the same time, while visiting the effects of this disaster on some of the poorest and most vulnerable members of our community.

It does not take long to realise that this benefit is in trouble when we see two former Prime Ministers, Gordon Brown and Sir John Major, both giving very stark warnings about it. Gordon Brown has predicted civil unrest if something is not done, because the benefit is too complex and causing huge suffering. As we have heard from my hon. Friend the Member for Birmingham,
Ladywood (Shabana Mahmood), people already under financial pressure are being expected to absorb the loss of £2,400 a year, or £200 each month. John Major, the ex-Conservative Prime Minister, has said that “that degree of loss...is not something the majority of the British population would think of as fair, and if people think you have removed yourself from fairness then you are in deep political trouble.”

The Government are in deep political trouble with the roll-out of this benefit, and they know it. If they have nothing to hide, and if we are to believe the scarcely credible comments from Conservative Members, who seem to think that absolutely nothing is going wrong, they should vote to allow these papers, which the motion seeks to have published, into the public domain so that we can see the advice that they have been given, including the costs and benefits of the roll-out, and the analysis that seems to make the Conservative party so complacent.

Johnny Mercer (Plymouth, Moor View) (Con): The hon. Lady has said that many people on the Conservative Benches seem to think there is nothing wrong with universal credit. Could she indicate just one of them, for the benefit of the House?

Ms Eagle: I am tempted to say the Secretary of State, who has just left the Chamber and so is not listening to the rest of the debate. There is enormous complacency already evident in this debate on the Conservative Benches, perhaps because they do not have people in tears in their advice surgeries trying to get by with absolutely no money and no prospect of getting any.

The National Audit Office itself has said that more than half of those who apply for this benefit do not complete an application form on the first time of asking. That increases the delays. It is almost as if the benefit has been designed to put people off. In my constituency, I have recently had a case where somebody was advised in the jobcentre to migrate themselves voluntarily on to universal credit. They were told they would be eligible for £955 a month, but after the deductions, it was £513. By following the advice given to them by somebody in the jobcentre, they have made themselves much worse off. I could go through many such cases if there was time.

When people object to what is going on with universal credit, they have to go to a tribunal, but tribunal waiting times have increased massively. A recent written parliamentary answer told me that there was a 16-week waiting time in the north west, but a constituent has just written to me that when they appealed against a decision, they received a letter saying there is a 33-week waiting time. Even if someone appeals against a dubious decision, they have to wait, with no money, for more than half a year. This is no way to treat the poorest and most vulnerable people in our society. As the previous Prime Minister, Gordon Brown, has said, this is turning our welfare sector into a benefits system—universal credit—in serious trouble and causing serious hardship, and listening to Conservative Members pretending that nothing is wrong is not a good use of time.

Johnny Mercer: With the greatest of respect, I have listened, and nobody has said that; nobody believes that universal credit is perfect. People in this House can keep repeating this stuff—to make themselves believe it; to get a clip for social media so they can say they have had a rant at the Tories—but it is poor politics and it has to change.

Neil Gray rose—

Johnny Mercer: No, I will not give way to the hon. Gentleman. The other thing I will not accept in this House is the illusion that Conservative Members come to work to keep the poor poor and to feather their own nests. You gave the impression that nobody on the Conservative Benches cares about getting people out of poverty, but that is simply wrong. Individuals like me would not speak up against universal credit—and so become the lightning rod for abuse whipped up by some of the creatures on social media—and do something about it simply for our own ends. We would not be able to change this policy if we listened to you—

Madam Deputy Speaker (Dame Rosie Winterton): Order. Obviously this debate is heated, but it is important that the hon. Gentleman not refer to other hon. Members using the word “you”. If you use the word “you”, it is to me.

Neil Gray rose—

Johnny Mercer: I give way to the hon. Gentleman.

Neil Gray: The thrust of my speech was an appeal for Conservative Members to listen to the experts. I listed dozens for them to listen to. Are they scaremongering?

Johnny Mercer: If any Member assumes that individuals on the Conservative Benches are driven by anything other than the evidence, they are seriously mistaken. I absolutely accept that there are groups in this sector working night and day that agree that we need to do more on things such as taper rates and work allowances, and we on the Conservative Benches will keep pushing for that, but the assertion that we do not see any of this evidence in our constituencies and act on it is just plain wrong. We have plenty of people coming into our
surgery, but instead of launching into a diatribe about how the Conservative party is attempting to keep people in poverty, we should look at the things that this Government have done, such as the reduced waiting times and the landlord portal—things that are actually making a difference in places such as Plymouth.

**Owen Smith (Pontypridd) (Lab):** Does the hon. Gentleman not remember that it was a Conservative Government who introduced universal credit, including the taper rate and the work allowance, a Tory Prime Minister who cut £4 billion from it, and a Conservative Secretary of State who in recent weeks admitted that more than 1 million families will be £2,400 a year worse off? Does that not worry him?

**Johnny Mercer:** The hon. Gentleman will be as aware as I am that people in this country are absolutely sick of Labour and Conservative politicians blaming each other for the situation we are in. The legacy benefits system sapped the ambition of a generation of young people in cities such as mine to go into work, to get a job and to build a family. That system needed reform. You cannot marry the idea that you should bin universal credit with a commitment to improving the life chances of our most vulnerable constituents: the two are not intellectually compatible.

We have heard about a lot of the problems with universal credit—

**Several hon. Members rose—**

**Johnny Mercer:** No, I will not give way any more. I have been on my feet for far too long already.

We must be realistic. When it comes to the most vulnerable in our constituencies—I have plenty of them in Plymouth—the single biggest factor in improving their life chances, which should be the driving motivation for every single individual in the House regardless of political background, is having a job. Whether we like it or not, unemployment is at record lows in this country, and employment is at record high levels.

**Several hon. Members rose—**

**Johnny Mercer:** No, I will not give way any more.

Have we more to do? Of course we have. Am I happy? Do I think that this is an area in which we can reduce our financial commitment? Absolutely not. Do I think that the Conservatives can come up with a policy and not follow it through with funding? Absolutely not. I will continue to lobby, along with my colleagues, to ensure that, in his Budget, the Chancellor reinvests some of that money so that the policy works. Ultimately, however, this should be one of the defining principles of a modern, compassionate Conservative party. People out there in the country want welfare reform. They do not want to pay into a welfare system that does not encourage people to work, and, ultimately, they pay our wages. It is their politics, not ours. They want welfare reform, and we have a duty to deliver that.

**Mrs Madeleine Moon (Bridgend) (Lab):** Can we consider a different group: those with terminal illnesses such as motor neurone disease? At present, they are required to turn up at a jobcentre and speak to a job coach about universal credit and their work capability. Despite being terminally ill, they are still expected to talk about their work aspirations. Will the hon. Gentleman support my Bill to remove that?

**Johnny Mercer:** Conservative Members deplore the personal experiences of any individuals who have been at the wrong end of unacceptable circumstances, and I know that Ministers will work as hard as possible to ensure that people such as that are looked after. But let us get away from this whole idea that Conservative Members have no interest in improving the lives of the most vulnerable and that all that lies with the Opposition, because it is rubbish.

**Several hon. Members rose—**

**Madam Deputy Speaker (Dame Rosie Winterton):** Order. There have been so many interventions that speeches have lasted much longer than five minutes. After the next speech, I shall have to reduce the speaking time limit to four minutes.

2.22 pm

**Maria Eagle (Garston and Halewood) (Lab):** The implementation of universal credit has been an object lesson in how not to carry out social security reform. A system that was meant to be fully implemented by April 2017 will not now be fully operational until December 2023, but some of us doubt that even that deadline will be met.

The evidence that we have seen is damning. The National Audit Office says that universal credit has been too slow to roll out, causes hardship and is not delivering value for money. Some claimants waited eight months for payment. In 2017, 25% of new claimants were paid late. A fifth of those were the neediest, and waited five months or more. Eight years in, only 10% of claimants are in the system, and the administrative cost is currently £699 a claim—four times as much as the Government intend to spend.

This type of chaos, and the hardship that results, is certainly what we have experienced in Liverpool. I will give just one example, although there are many more in my caseload. My constituent Kelly Redmond has three children, and her mother, who has chronic obstructive pulmonary disease and dementia, lives with her. Tax credits formed an important part of her income. On 28 May, her new partner, who was from Runcorn and claiming universal credit, moved in with her, and she advised the DWP of a change in circumstances. What followed was an administrative farce of Kafkaesque proportions, allied to official indifference and incompetence, that systematically deprived the family of the means to live.

Her Majesty’s Revenue and Customs cancelled Kelly’s tax credit claim, and told her to claim universal credit. The DWP said that she could not claim universal credit because it had not been rolled out in Liverpool, and told her to claim the tax credits that HMRC had just cancelled. HMRC told her that she could not claim tax credits for six months because her partner was claiming universal credit. It then told my office that it had reinstated her tax credit claim, but it never did. The DWP promised my office on numerous occasions that the issue would be sorted out, but did not sort it out. By the middle of August, the DWP hotline was telling me that the DWP service innovation team and the HMRC
We needed change and we had the courage to bring about that change. The strength of universal credit is that it simplifies things and encourages work. Benefits should mirror the working world. That is why it is right that most UC payments are monthly; most salaries are paid monthly. It should provide a way back into work and not provide a way of life.

One major test for UC is whether it is helping people get back into work. The answer to that is an emphatic yes. We have seen huge increases in employment. Youth unemployment is at its lowest rate ever and wages have exceeded inflation every month for the last seven months. Part of the reason for this is that we have a benefits system that facilitates work. We were told—I think it

2.27 pm

Gareth Johnson (Dartford) (Con): Let me say at the outset that I do not claim that everything about universal credit is perfect, or that everything has gone according to plan. I think it is inevitable that such a huge reform will involve issues that will need to be dealt with. To suggest that it should be scrapped, however—as the hon. Member for Garston and Halewood (Maria Eagle) has just done—is to risk losing the significant benefits that it has brought about. We should not be in the business of throwing the baby out with the bathwater, but that is precisely the attitude of those who say that this whole benefits system should be scrapped.

It is worth noting why it was necessary to bring in universal credit and to consider where we have come from. Under the last Government, we had a system that was confusing, bureaucratic and unfair, and ensured that people did not receive the benefits to which they were entitled. Indeed, that was factored into the budget of the DWP, which knew that the system was so complicated that it would not have to pay out the money that it would otherwise have had to pay out. Those arrangements also led to the worst aspect of the system, which was that it prevented people from working.

Patricia Gibson (North Ayrshire and Arran) (SNP): The hon. Gentleman is telling us about the faults of the previous system. Single parents are particularly hard hit by universal credit: cuts in the work allowance mean that the average parent loses about £800 a year, and some lose up to £2,000 a year. Given that 91% of single parents are women, this system discriminates hugely against women. Does he agree that that is unfair and should be addressed?

Gareth Johnson: I do not agree. There have been these transitional protections that we need to have in place. I am not saying that every aspect of universal credit has been correctly implemented—I do not think anyone is claiming that—but I think it is right that we try to ensure that people are better off under this system and that it is a fairer system. Most important, as I have said, is that it should enable people to work.

Under the previous system, I lost count of the number of times people said to me, “I cannot afford to work.” They used to say that they could not possibly get a job even though they would love to do so because they would lose their benefits as a consequence. That was as frustrating as it was wrong. It trapped people into staying on benefits and ensured that people got out of the habit of working. The best way out of poverty is through work and we need a benefits system that allows for that, and we did not have that under the previous Administration. What we saw was excessive tinkering, which added to the confusion surrounding benefits. Myriad different types of tax credits were introduced and abolished during that time; it was described at the time as being like a gardener going around pulling up plants to see if the roots were still there. That is how complicated the system was that we had to take over. We needed change and we had the courage to bring about that change. We should take the credit for having done so.

The strength of universal credit is that it simplifies things and encourages work. Benefits should mirror the working world. That is why it is right that most UC payments are monthly; most salaries are paid monthly. It should provide a way back into work and not provide a way of life.
was Ed Balls who said this—that our policies would result in unemployment going up by 1 million, but the contrary is the case: employment has gone up by 3 million as a consequence of our policies. No one is claiming that the system is perfect—I am certainly not—but it is a massive improvement on what we previously had, so is well worth keeping.

One of the reasons we have low unemployment in the UK while it is much higher in other countries, particularly on the continent, is that we have a benefits system that allows people to get back to work. Yet some people inexplicably say that that system should be scrapped.

I will cut my comments short now, as I am running out of time. Care and consideration are needed during the rest of the implementation of UC. It needs to be done and it needs to be adequately funded. I ask the Minister to be cautious in doing this. We must not be complacent about it, but we should not scrap UC, as we have been asked to do.

2.32 pm

Caroline Flint (Don Valley) (Lab): The Government’s 2010 White Paper said:

“The Government is committed to ensuring that no-one loses as a direct result of these reforms. We have ensured that no-one will experience a reduction in the benefit they receive as a result of the introduction of Universal Credit.”

That is a complete contrast to the Secretary of State’s admission to the Cabinet just two weeks ago, when she allegedly acknowledged that people could be £2,400 worse off. I may have missed it, but I have not heard a denial of that. This has happened because of the former Chancellor’s—now editor or something, with a number of other jobs—£3 billion raid on the UC pot in the 2015 Budget. The Budget on 29 October gives the Government the opportunity to put this money back in and get things back on an even keel, and that is my first ask.

My second ask is that the Secretary of State considers the issue of rent arrears. St Leger Homes, which manages 21,000 homes for Doncaster Council, advises me that there are over 2,400 council tenants on UC in Doncaster. Over three quarters of them are in rent arrears. UC has added another £190 to the average person’s rent arrears since it was rolled out in Doncaster in October 2017. Ministers can say that those people were already in arrears, but I do not think we should dig a hole and say that people who are on UC have been asked to do.

2.36 pm

Priti Patel (Witham) (Con): I want to focus on the principles behind UC and why it has been brought in, as that is the key to understanding how we can ensure UC works as it was supposed to. Present changes and issues with the roll-out and the detail of implementation are of course important, but they should not take attention away from the core principles of UC and how it transforms lives.

I was in the Chamber in March 2011 when my right hon. Friend the Member for Chingford and Woodford Green (Mr Duncan Smith) introduced the Welfare Reform Bill in one of the most passionate speeches on addressing poverty that this Chamber has heard. He said at the very beginning of his speech that day that the reform of welfare was needed because, despite the economic growth and job creation between 1992 and 2008, there was a group of working-age people that was effectively left behind.

I remember the situation back in 2010 when the coalition Government were formed: there were too many households who were not being supported into employment; there were complexities with the legacy benefits; there were cliff edges faced when people left benefits and went into employment; and there were cases of intergenerational poverty in this country, with children being raised in households where two or three generations were affected by periods of worklessness. And, of course, we had to do more to change that, and my right hon. Friend was right at that time to pursue a holistic approach to tackling poverty and helping people get back into work. UC was a response to a system where at the peak of the Labour boom there were 3 million people on out-of-work benefits, 1 million of whom did not work a day for many years under a Labour Government because they were caught in a welfare trap and written off. A great many were on incapacity benefit as well, and things had to change.

The principles of UC are clear. It is intended to simplify the benefits system, reduce complexity and support more people into employment and into higher paid employment. UC was needed to help to get people work-ready, and transitioning people on to UC helps to understand and identify the underlying financial difficulties they face.

We have heard from the right hon. Member for Don Valley (Caroline Flint) about issues with withdrawal rates and taper changes and what happened in 2015
and 2016. I was in the Department at the time, and my right hon. Friend the Member for Chingford and Woodford Green left the Government because of what happened when we fought back and presented the Treasury with distributional analysis showing the impact the cuts would have on households and individuals.

It is important that we now get this change right. I do not believe in scrapping UC at all, but we need the modifications to deliver the life-changing support and the opportunities that the benefit was designed to provide. Yes, my right hon. Friend the Secretary of State has gone through the process of testing, learning and rectifying the problems, but we must now go back and invest in the right way to modify the changes that happened. We must bring back the choice; Governments have choices and this Government now have the chance to support the principle of making work pay and support independence and dignity in work.

Jamie Stone (Caithness, Sutherland and Easter Ross) (LD): Will the right hon. Lady give way?

Priti Patel: No, I will not. I do not have time.

We must also ensure that we fully provide the ladder of opportunity to give a foothold to people and families who want to work and support them into work, as well as addressing the challenges in our welfare system. The task of this Government and the Treasury is well-versed, and I know that the Minister will not have to cover this point later. We must now ensure that we revert to the principles and purpose of universal credit, to bring back the independence, dignity and value of ensuring that work fully pays.

Stephen Timms (East Ham) (Lab): The right hon. Member for Witham (Priti Patel) is absolutely right to say that change is urgently needed, and I hope that her Front-Bench colleagues will have heard that. Of all the many flaws in universal credit, the worst is the five-week delay between claiming and being entitled to benefit. Ministers can justify this—the Secretary of State had a go at doing so again yesterday—only in the case of people who have just left a monthly paid job and therefore have a month’s salary in the bank. The reality is that a very large number of people do not have a month’s salary in the bank when they make a claim for universal credit. Many are paid weekly or on zero-hours contracts; for all sorts of reasons, many are simply not in the position to have that much money in the bank. I spoke to a claimant on Merseyside at a time when the delay was even longer than it is now. She told me that the jobcentre had sent her a way to live on water for six weeks. She reached the point at which she attempted to take her own life. Five weeks without support is not a realistic or acceptable feature of this benefit.

Chris Philp: I thank the right hon. Gentleman for raising that important case. Would his constituent not have been eligible to receive an advance payment, had she applied for one? They are now available at 100%.

Stephen Timms: She was not told about the availability of an advance payment. They are now being better publicised than when she made her claim, but the problem with advance payments is that people are being plunged into debt right at the start of their claim. For many, it is impossible to get out of debt once the system has forced them on to that slope. The result is that they have to go to food banks. We know that food bank demand rockets when universal credit comes in, because people get behind with their rent and other debts mount. I say to Conservative Members—many of them are fully aware of this—that this is not the way to treat our fellow citizens. Universal credit must be changed to stop this happening.

Heidi Allen: I appreciate the right hon. Gentleman giving way, not least because I might run out of time and not be able to say all that I want to say in my speech, including suggesting that it might be a wiser idea to make the advance payment into a first payment. It could be a bit like when people who do not pay their last month’s rent do not get their deposit back. We would look to take something back if anything was due, right at the end of the claim. Does the right hon. Gentleman agree that we should turn the advance payment on its head so that it is no longer a loan that we need to take back?

Stephen Timms: The hon. Lady makes an interesting suggestion, and I hope that her Front-Bench colleagues will listen to it. We certainly need urgent change on this point.

Ministers have, perhaps understandably, developed a tin ear to the voices that they should have been listening to over the past eight years, as the warnings about what they were getting into were being sounded. They have not been listening to those warnings, but I hope that they are at least listening to the Residential Landlords Association. They might have heard Paul Cunningham, the chair of Great Yarmouth Landlords Association, on the radio last week, as I did. He said that the majority of landlords in Great Yarmouth were now unwilling to let property to universal credit claimants because they inevitably got into arrears with their rent. He said:

“It is a social experiment that’s gone wrong”.

Of the Department for Work and Pensions, he said:

“They remain in denial about the system”.

His concluding point was that “it doesn’t make business sense to let a property to a tenant who has no idea of when their claim is going to be processed or how much money they are going to get, and who will invariably end up in arrears”.

That is the reality of the experience of private landlords, let alone the organisations representing claimants that have been making submissions to the Government.

Among the many representations that the Government have received about managed migration, they will have seen the report prepared by the Resolution Foundation, and I hope that they have looked at it carefully. A lot of the submissions expressed deep foreboding about where we are heading with the managed migration programme. The Resolution Foundation made the following recommendation, which I commend to Ministers:

“The managed migration should only begin when the DWP has shown service levels meet a standard agreed with external experts including SSAC”—

the Social Security Advisory Committee—

“and the Work and Pensions Committee. We suggest this should be that 90 per cent of new claims are paid in full and on time”.

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The recommendation—an excellent one—is that managed migration should not commence until that level of service can be achieved, and I hope that the Minister will be able to respond to that when he winds up. I commend that idea to him.

It is clear that we are heading into very difficult territory if this goes ahead on the current basis, as is still likely. The Conservative party has been warned about what happens to parties when they go ahead with such projects, given the prospects for universal credit. There is now, however, a chance—there is a moment here—for Ministers to fix these problems. They could take the necessary action; the Chancellor could do so in the Budget on Monday week. I urge them to stop the roll-out until these problems are fixed and not to press ahead in the way that is being proposed. Universal credit was a perfectly sensible idea. Unfortunately, its implementation has been very badly handled. The problems went right back to the start, when the July 2010 Green Paper stated:

“The IT changes that would be necessary to deliver”—universal credit—

“would not constitute a major IT project.”

How wrong that was, sadly.

2.46 pm

Nigel Mills (Amber Valley) (Con): I am happy to follow the right hon. Member for East Ham (Stephen Timms). I agree with much of what he has said and with his constructive suggestions for making this work. That is where I want to start my speech. I still believe that this is the right thing to do. Universal credit is the right sort of benefit system. It replaces a much more complicated system that people did not understand and found really hard to work with, but it is important that we get it right and do not start rolling it out for even greater numbers until we are sure that it will get the right amount of money to the right people at the right time. I agree with the right hon. Gentleman’s point about the Resolution Foundation’s recommendations, although I am a little surprised that it asked for only a 90% accuracy rate. That implies that we are happy to have 10% of people who roll over to universal credit getting the wrong amount of money on the wrong day. I would hope that we can put in place a much more reliable system than that.

I agree with the Government’s approach on test and learn. I can remember being on the Work and Pensions Committee when the full roll-out was originally planned for 2014, which drifted by a little while ago. I think we are now aiming for a nine-year roll-out. However, it was absolutely right that we did not press ahead and roll this out so fast that we ended up with hundreds of thousands of people taking on huge amounts of debt because they were being given the wrong amount of money. We saw that happening with tax credits and we do not want to repeat it. However, test and learn cannot just be a software thing. It must also be about the design of the system and the way it actually works. If it becomes plainly apparent, as we carry on the roll-out, that things are not right and that people are not getting the amount of money they are entitled to at the right time, let us fix it and remove the rough edges. In that way, we will end up with a far better system, and people will not be in debt when they do not need to be, with all the consequences that that would have.

I support what the Secretary of State has been asking for from the Chancellor. We saw some interesting ideas being leaked yesterday, and I think that most of us in this House would welcome most of them as a great improvement. Let us build on the reform that we put in place a year ago to allow people to keep an extra two weeks’ housing benefit. Let us at least add employment and support allowance to that, to ensure that people do not have a gap in their income right at the start. It is just not right to expect people to live for five weeks without any money if they do not have a redundancy pay cheque or a final pay cheque in the bank. Let us fix that and try to find a smoother transition. That would cost a significant amount, but in the great scheme of things, it would be a tiny fraction of the overall £160 billion a year welfare bill. It would not break the bank, and if that is what we have to do to get this right, let us do it.

Jamie Stone: Does the hon. Gentleman agree that the indifferent broadband coverage in remote constituencies such as mine does not help the roll-out of UC and that we should try to tick that issue off before we go any further?

Nigel Mills: That is probably a debate for a different day. Sticking with universal credit and managed migration, as I said to the Employment Minister yesterday when he referred to moving people over, that is exactly what we ought to do, particularly for vulnerable people who may not get the process right. We have all their information. We have all the details we need. Let us move them seamlessly from the old benefit on to the new one. We should not expect them to do that for themselves—their day just risks their missing out because they have not opened their post, they do not understand it, or they are too scared to do it. There is no need to add that stress to their lives. Moving them over will not cost anything at all; it is just a far better way of the Government using the system.

Finally, the motivation for UC was to make it absolutely clear that work would pay. That is what the staff in my jobcentres really value. It is a simple system. They can explain how it works and show people that they will always be better off in work. The problem that has arisen from the savings that the previous Chancellor introduced three and a bit years ago is that it is not entirely clear how we can demonstrate to some groups of people that they will always be better off in work—lone parents and second earners are the two cases most often cited—so let us put clarity back in the system. If we want this welfare change, which we all support, to work, the fundamental promise that people will always be better off in work must be made demonstrably clear to them. Let us put money back in and get the work incentives right. That way we will have a system that we can make work.

2.51 pm

Mr Ivan Lewis (Bury South) (Ind): We are having this debate because of one man’s vision to radically reform the benefits system. Having lost the Conservative party leadership, the right hon. Member for Chingford and Woodford Green (Mr Duncan Smith) decided to focus on the challenges facing the poorest in our society. For that, he deserves credit, not derision. He saw for himself what many of us came into politics to address: the horrendous social injustice and inequality that scar too
many of our communities, the intergenerational disadvantage, the wasted talent and the lack of hope and dreams that hold back too many of our fellow citizens. The right hon. Gentleman decided that one of our top priorities needed to be the simplification and streamlining of people’s benefits, which would support them more effectively and remove some of the disincentives to work—an objective that has been shared by many progressive reformers since the welfare state was created.

Where did it all go wrong? First, it is not possible to be a champion for social justice while presiding over a hostile environment for those who were the greatest victims of social injustice. Secondly, to successfully implement radical whole-system reform significant extra resources are always required up front, both to manage the organisational transition and to address unintended consequences. Those resources were never made available. Instead, budgets were cut.

Like many right hon. and hon. Members, I have seen for myself the human impact of the failings of universal credit, and the roll-out in Bury has been only limited so far. One constituent works for the local authority. She sometimes gets two wage payments in one assessment period, and the rigidity of the assessment period means that she does not get universal credit when that happens. That then affects the housing element that she may have received. She is in private accommodation, so the landlord will not tolerate any arrears, causing extreme financial pressures in the months when she has to pay rent. She is not able to budget in the same way as with tax credits and cannot access any other loans. Consequently, she is considering payday lenders.

Another constituent is single and lives with her six-year-old child in privately rented accommodation. She was transferred from income support to universal credit around the end of 2017. She suffers from dyslexia, anxiety and severe depression. When she was transferred on to universal credit, she was not given the option of claiming employment and support allowance. She was asked to attend a universal credit interview outside our area, which took two hours to reach by three buses and the same in return. When she got there, a piece of paper was pushed under nose, and she was asked to read and sign the document. The same woman was asked to attend a working well interview. She used the sat-nav on her mobile to find it, but unfortunately her phone died. She went home immediately, and her friend phoned the DWP, but she was still sanctioned.

Our society should always be judged by how we support the most vulnerable to have a decent quality of life and empower those who are able to exercise maximum power and control over their own lives. Universal credit is failing in both respects. The Government have behaved appallingly in denying the scale of the impact of their failed policies on our constituents. They must now take full responsibility and stop the distress and hardship that their incompetence has caused, so that thousands of others are not affected in this way in the future.

3.55 pm

Steve Double (St. Austell and Newquay) (Con): I am pleased to be able to contribute to this debate, and it is a joy to follow the hon. Member for Bury South (Mr Lewis). My experience of the roll-out of universal credit in my constituency bears no resemblance to the picture painted by Labour Members. Now, let me say that universal credit is not perfect, and there are still issues that we need to correct, but it has been a positive thing overall that is achieving the intended outcomes for those who are claiming it.

Reform of our benefits system was long overdue. I saw the impact in my constituency, which has some of the lowest-paid people in the country and where people were locked into a benefit system that abandoned them to being out of work and to not being able to earn more by working more hours. Basically, it provided a trap in which they lost their aspiration and their enthusiasm for work, because they saw so many people on unemployment benefits who were better off than those who were in work. Universal credit has begun to change that, and it is absolutely the right reform at this time.

The feedback from the DWP staff in my constituency, both at the Jobcentre Plus and the UC processing centre—it covers the whole south-west and now some London boroughs because the staff there have performed so well that they are being given other areas to process—is that UC is working well. The staff say that it is a simple system. They love it, and claimants like it. However, they also told me that one of the problems is all the scaremongering, primarily from the Labour party. Claimants come in fearful and terrified of what UC is going to mean for them. Then, when staff sit down and work it through with them, they suddenly realise that UC is not like the terrible picture that is being painted of it and their experiences are actually positive.

As for evidence that that is happening, the Jobcentre Plus staff told me that people who move over to universal credit tell their friends how good it is after a few months, and they then have people coming into the Jobcentre Plus saying, “My friends have told me that UC is so good for them. When can I sign up for it?” That is what the jobcentre staff have told me.

Michael Tomlinson (Mid Dorset and North Poole) (Con): My hon. Friend is exactly right. That is what every single member of staff at the Jobcentre Plus is saying. They tell me that they love the new system, which is enabling them to help people to achieve the outcomes that we want everyone to achieve.

We need a balance here. Yes, not everything is perfect, but the Government have used the right method in rolling out UC by taking a phased approach, by evaluating, reviewing and learning, and by making changes where necessary to ensure that we get things right. That should be welcomed. We have seen in recent times how the Government made changes to the waiting times, to the advances and to other things to adjust the system to make it fit for purpose and ensure that it was achieving the outcomes that it was designed to achieve. I applaud the Government for taking that approach.

Many of us can remember the absolute shambles when tax credits were introduced with a big bang and all the problems at that time. This approach is right, and
I encourage the Government to carry on taking the same approach as they roll out UC. They should keep listening to the feedback that comes back from DWP staff and make adjustments as necessary. It is clear that there is further work to do. We still need to look at the taper rate and the work allowance to make sure that work does pay. We have to make sure that people are incentivised to work, and to take on extra hours, by making sure they can keep as much of the money as possible.

We also need to consider extending the time for repaying the advances so that repayment is not a burden. People currently have to repay within a year, and perhaps two years would be better. People should be allowed to take the advance without being put under so much financial pressure to repay.

I say to the Department for Work and Pensions and to the Treasury that this reform is very important. Let us make sure it works by ensuring there is enough money in the system to make it work. It would be wrong if universal credit did not achieve what it is intended to achieve because of a lack of money. Let us make sure it has the funds it needs to work and achieve the outcomes we all want to see.

3 pm

Rushanara Ali (Bethnal Green and Bow) (Lab): The Government’s universal credit policy is an utter shambles and a disgrace. Even if the original vision was well intentioned, it is forcing families into poverty, homelessness and destitution. According to The Times, some households will be £200 a week worse off after transferring to universal credit. Half of lone parents and two thirds of working-age couples with children are likely to be £2,400 a year worse off.

The Government have used universal credit as a vehicle for cuts. Instead of helping to lift families out of poverty, it is increasing dependency on food banks, increasing homelessness and increasing indebtedness. The context of this policy is that 4.5 million children are already living in poverty in this country. With disability benefits being cut by £5 billion, child benefits being cut by £2.8 billion and housing benefits being cut by £2.3 billion, universal credit will add to people’s suffering. This is not about transferring people from worklessness and unemployment into employment; it will increase in-work poverty.

The Government talk about ending austerity, but the reality is that this policy will add to people’s suffering. The Government rapidly need to find the additional funding to make this policy achieve its original objective of creating an opportunity for people to make the transition into work and to be able to lift themselves out of poverty. That is not what is happening.

Gareth Johnson: I agree with the hon. Lady that universal credit needs to be adequately funded. Is she as surprised as I am, therefore, that the Labour party did not support the extra £1.5 billion given to universal credit in the last Budget?

Rushanara Ali: The hon. Gentleman should talk to the Chancellor about sorting out this policy, because, too often, his Government are making policies on the British people without having a clue about what is happening in people’s lives and dismiss the problems that our constituents face. That happened with national health service reform. Where is the former Health Secretary, who introduced those policies that have devastated the health service? The same is happening with welfare reform. Ministers met out incredibly devastating, damaging policies on the population, just as they are with Brexit, and then they leave. That is not good enough. Take responsibility and sort out this policy.

If universal credit were a workable policy that improved people’s lives, the Minister might have support from other parties, but that is not where we are. People are being forced into poverty and destitution—that is the legacy of the former Secretary of State for Work and Pensions, the right hon. Member for Chingford and Woodford Green (Mr Duncan Smith), who introduced this policy. Frankly, he went on a discovery exercise in opposition and found poverty in this country. He decided to come to this House to introduce universal credit, but the reality is that it will make matters worse.

Even those of us who gave the right hon. Gentleman the benefit of the doubt when he founded the so-called Centre for Social Justice now find that his intentions were utterly disgraceful. He presided over a policy that will devastate millions of people’s lives, and Ministers should get a grip and make sure that those mistakes do not end up causing more suffering in our country, because that is his legacy. He should be here taking responsibility for what is happening in this country.

Over half the population of my constituency, including over half the children, live in poverty—the proportion has gone up significantly. Local government funding has gone down by 24% since this Government came to power. Furthermore, families with more than two children are facing cuts to their benefits. The two-child policy will devastate children’s life chances. The policies introduced by this Government are an attempt to cut much needed funding. Although they might have been well intentioned, they are making a mess of a policy that might have commanded support on both sides of the House. The Government need to get a grip, sort out the policy and delay the roll-out until universal credit is absolutely watertight and protects people’s lives, rather than damages them.

3.5 pm

Chris Philp (Croydon South) (Con): My right hon. Friend the Member for Chingford and Woodford Green (Mr Duncan Smith) is one of the most decent and compassionate men I have ever met, and the slurs we have just heard on his motivation are completely unacceptable and have no place in a calm and civilised debate. Some Labour Members, such as the right hon. Member for East Ham (Stephen Timms), have set an extremely fine example as to how these matters can be debated in a calm and proper way—I always listen carefully to what he has to say, because his speeches are always thoughtful and well delivered.

Let us remind ourselves of why universal credit was introduced in the first place. The previous system was broken and was not fit for purpose because there were in effect marginal taxation rates of over 90% in many cases, and there were cliff edges—at 16 hours of work, for example—that meant that people who worked more hours were worse off. People came to us, their Members of Parliament, and said, “We are not going to work any more hours, because there will be less money in our
[Chris Philp]

pocket afterwards.” That is clearly a completely unacceptable situation, which is why this reform, in principle, is so necessary.

We have heard today about individual errors in the system, which are obviously very regrettable and Ministers will want to correct them, but let us not forget that almost 6 million people are in receipt of these benefits—either the old ones or the new ones—and, when we are handing out 6 million payments a month, there are bound to be occasional individual errors. Let us not confuse those very regrettable individual errors with a more systemic issue.

Some systemic issues were identified during the roll-out of universal credit, and steps have been taken in the past six or nine months to address some of those issues.

Michael Tomlinson: My hon. Friend has mentioned two categories: systemic problems and individual problems. Surely people with individual problems should go to the Department or to their local Jobcentre Plus and say, “Please address this. Something has gone wrong.” In the case of systemic problems, we should adopt the Government’s approach of testing and learning to adapt and change the system.

Chris Philp: My hon. Friend is absolutely right, as always. Where there have been systemic issues, measures have been taken to address them. One example is that housing benefit now gets paid for another two weeks after the change to address some of the issues with rent arrears that Members have properly raised. Secondly, claimants can now get a 100% advance, which addresses the point raised by the right hon. Member for East Ham. The seven-day wait has also been eliminated.

The Minister will also want to think about fine-tuning the period when calculating eligibility. A person who receives their last salary payment, particularly if it is quite a large salary payment, towards the end of their last month in employment may not be eligible to receive a universal credit payment in the following month because their final salary payment counts towards the calculation. I have such a constituency case, and the dates need to be fine-tuned and studied a little more carefully. I would be happy to sit down with the Minister to go through the particulars of the case, which is quite technical and complicated, if it would assist him in his work.

Croydon South has the joint highest proportion of claimants who have been moved across to universal credit, at 43%. Only two or three other constituencies in the country have such a high rate, so we have quite a good base of evidence in my constituency. The SNP Front Bench said that we should take with a pinch of salt what Conservative Members say—


Chris Philp: He said we should take with a lorry load of salt what Conservative Members say about how UC operates in their constituencies. That was of course a slur on the integrity of Conservative Members, but I contacted my caseworker during this debate to ascertain the facts. In Croydon, about 4,000 people are currently in receipt of UC, because 43% have migrated; that is my estimate and so it may not be exactly right, but the figure is probably somewhere in the region of 4,000.

In the past six months there have been 21 cases where someone has contacted me as their constituency MP, some of which were to do with eligibility questions, such as where the person lives. I would say that 21 individual cases out of about 4,000 is not an excessive number of queries, but when they are raised I know that Ministers will look to deal with them.

Opposition Members have suggested that this is about cuts, but I respectfully remind them again that benefits paid to people who are disabled have gone up to £54 billion in total—that is a substantial real-terms increase. This is not about cuts, as more money is going into disability benefits now than at any time in history. I shall conclude by saying that a measure of compassion, and of Government success in policy and welfare, is not how much money we spend on aggregate, but how many people we get out of poverty and into prosperity, and that is done through work.

Several hon. Members rose—

Madam Deputy Speaker (Dame Rosie Winterton): Order. I am sorry, but there continue to be interventions and if we are to have any chance of getting everybody in, I am going to have to cut the time limit to three minutes, as of now.

3.11 pm

Danielle Rowley (Midlothian) (Lab): I am going to try to whizz through my points in the short time available, Madam Deputy Speaker. Worryingly, no impact assessments on UC have been produced since 2011. UC has changed a lot since then and it is now a very different system. If it is a “test and learn” system, why have we not seen these assessments coming through? Where is the learning in that?

My local citizens advice bureau manager has sent me a message ahead of today’s debate, saying:

“Universal Credit’s big impact is on people’s mental health. We are seeing so many people who cannot deal with UC due to the fragility of their mental health. It’s making underlying mental health worse. We are aware of clients attempting suicide due to the anxiety of the whole thing.”

That is worrying, but it is also worrying that in response to my multiple parliamentary questions asking whether there are any statistics on the link between suicide attempts or suicide, and UC, I have been told that there is no data on that at all. I am very concerned about that, too.

I held a local roundtable to pull together different charities, organisations, people on UC and the Public and Commercial Services Union to talk about the issues. It recommended a delay on the repayment of advance payments—that was mentioned by a Conservative Member. We spoke about the digital aspect, which has been spoken about a lot. Yes, it can be an ambition to upskill people digitally, but what about those who cannot access digital, cannot get online or are unable to use it? Many people come to my office and to my local jobcentre and we help them to get on to the system, but the issue then is about maintaining their claim and getting notifications about meetings and things like that. I therefore urge a review of the digital aspect, too.

During today’s Prime Minister’s questions, I spoke about split payments and asked the Prime Minister what her thoughts were about them. I have raised that issue a few times and spoke about it in last week’s
Westminster Hall debate. When I have asked the Minister who is on the Front Bench today, the Prime Minister and the Minister who responded last week about this, I keep getting the response, “Oh, you can request a split payment.” That just does not take any consideration of what someone living in an abusive relationship might be going through, so I urge an urgent rethink on that.

3.14 pm

Neil O’Brien (Harborough) (Con): The case for UC long predates this Government. Opposition Members will recall that Labour welfare Secretary James Purnell proposed something very similar in 2008, and the Institute for Fiscal Studies called for the same thing. Why was there that consensus? Why is this the right thing to do? It is because we had a system that had grown up in a piecemeal way over time, and that had led to perverse consequences. In particular, large numbers of people on housing benefit and tax credits were losing 90p in every extra pound that they earned. There were mad situations, such as the one trapping people on 16 hours a week because there was no incentive to earn more. I know some of those people and it is good that we are fixing that problem through UC.

One SNP Member disputed the idea that UC was improving work incentives, so let me tell him what the IFS says. It says: “UC will still strengthen work incentives overall. Importantly, UC will have the welcome effect of strengthening work incentives for groups who face the weakest incentives now: the number of people who keep less than 30% of what they earn when they move into work will fall from 2.1 million to 0.7 million.”

So we are talking about a huge improvement; UC is breaking that welfare trap. The hon. Member for Garston and Halewood (Maria Eagle) said we should scrap UC, but, with respect, I do not think even the more sensible Members opposite believe that.

UC is one reason why we are seeing more people moving into work and we have record employment. It is why youth unemployment has been halved under this Government and 3.3 million more people have been helped into work.

Stephen Kerr (Stirling) (Con): Let me add a significant statistic: there are more than 800,000 vacancies in this country, so the opportunities to go even further in terms of employment are there before us—it is a great prize.

Neil O’Brien: High employment helps lots of different groups in our society, and so we have record rates of employment for ethnic minority people and for lone parents, we have 600,000 more disabled people working and employment for women is at a record high. As a constituency MP, it is wonderful for me to have 3,000 extra people in Harborough working than there were when we came into office.

Rachel Maclean (Redditch) (Con): I am sure my hon. Friend was about to mention that we also have record employment levels among another group—young people. We have record levels of youth employment now.

Neil O’Brien: My hon. Friend has taken the words out of my mouth; she has spiked my guns.

Of course we need to make sure we get this reform right, so I particularly welcome the move to restore the severe disability element within UC. As Ministers know, I have been in touch with them about that, and I hope we will pass the regulations to do it as soon as possible. I am glad the Department is spending an extra £1.5 billion ensuring that people can get the full amount paid up front, in order to make the system smoother. I am also glad it is solving some of the problems relating to the administration of the scheme, for example, by making it easier to get housing benefit paid directly to the landlord.

In some parts of this House, there seems to be a view that it is a measure of machismo to spend ever more on benefits, but we should reflect on what we inherited from Labour: nine out of 10 families, including Members of this House, were eligible for tax credits; people were getting more than £100,000 a year in housing benefit alone. That is why the welfare bill had increased by more than £3,000 per household. That is not a sensible way to run a country and it was not a good economic policy. It ended in not only national bankruptcy, but with a million extra people thrown on the dole under Labour. Labour Members should be ashamed of that record.

I am happy that we are now bringing in one of the highest minimum wages in the world. I am glad we are taking the lowest paid out of tax. That is the right approach, in order to lift people out of poverty. I am glad that members of our welfare team are listening to the important points made by colleagues such as my hon. Friends the Members for Amber Valley (Nigel Mills) and for South Cambridgeshire (Heidi Allen), who have continued to make the case for sensible reforms, in order to get right, rather than scrap for political reasons, an important reform that has powerful potential to improve the lives of people in our society.

3.18 pm

Anna Turley (Redcar) (Lab/Co-op): When the Prime Minister stood on the steps of Downing Street two years ago, she talked about fighting against the burning injustices of poverty. How hollow those words sound now to people who are “working around the clock”, doing their “best”, “struggling” through life—those were her words—and are on or will be transitioning to universal credit. Her words have turned to dust, with her promises sacrificed on the altar of austerity. Her Ministers sit here today clinging doggedly to a cruel and toxic policy that is pushing people into destitution, and which will be their legacy. Not content with devastating lives and communities through the bedroom tax, not content with a brutal sanctions regime that demoralises and degrades, not content with a work assessment regime that tells people with degenerative diseases they are fit to work and not content with a rise in child poverty, this Government are pushing on with a reform that has been proven—I stress, proven—to push people into debt and poverty since 2012. I know that Conservative Members have had enough of experts, but when they have the Trussell Trust, Citizens Advice, the National Audit Office, Mind, Shelter, local authorities, the Archbishop of Canterbury, more than 80 disability charities and their own former Prime Minister telling them that it is not working, surely they have to stop and think.

After universal credit goes live in Redcar and Cleveland on 28 November, families will receive their first lump-sum payment just a week before Christmas. That will pile
pressure on to families who are trying to pay for their Christmas and all their household bills, too. According to figures from the House of Commons Library, full roll-out in my area, including legacy benefits, will bring nearly 11,000 households on to universal credit. Almost 6,000 of those households have children and an estimated 3,500 households include people with disabilities. Thousands of vulnerable people in my area are going to be moved on to a benefit that has been beset with payment delays and has seen food bank use skyrocket by more than 50% in areas of full roll-out. Yesterday, in response to my question, the Minister could not reassure me that my constituents would not be worse off. When even the Secretary of State herself admits that the reform will see families worse off by £200 a month, we know that universal credit is not fit for purpose and must be stopped.

We all know that this is about more than just simplifying the welfare system and making work pay. Those are aims that many Members from all parties would support, but the reality is that this reform is being used to bring in £3 billion of welfare cuts through the back door and, despite the protests from Government Members, it is affecting people who are already in work. Analysis from the Child Poverty Action Group shows that, far from making work pay, as many have tried to argue today, the cuts reduce the gains made from work. Parents who are already working full time on the increased minimum wage would have to work the equivalent of an extra month per year, and single parents two months, just to recoup the cost. Moreover, the transitional protection that is meant to ensure that families do not lose out will not actually be available to many of those who need it.

Universal credit is being used by the Conservative party to disguise massive cuts to welfare. Rather than making work pay, as Government Members claim they want, the new system will leave vulnerable people reliant on food banks and forced into personal debt.

3.21 pm

Heidi Allen (South Cambridgeshire) (Con): I am pleased to speak in this vital debate, not only because when universal credit is rolled out it will affect millions of lives, but because two significant parliamentary events are coming soon: the Budget and the regulations on managed migration.

I have been a member of the Work and Pensions Committee since 2015 and I have seen the Government do the right thing time and again. We halted the planned cuts to tax credits in 2015, we reduced the taper rate from 65% to 63% in 2016, and last year we invested a further £1.5 billion to reduce the six-week waiting period to five weeks and provide two weeks of extra housing benefit run-on for people who move on to UC. We know that when presented with facts, the Government will act, so that is what I shall do today.

I wish to talk about how we can improve universal credit. Let me start with the existing system. The awarding of a national contract to Citizens Advice will transform the experience of claimants struggling to get on to the system for the first time, but it still will not fix the risk of debt faced by those who cannot wait five weeks for their first payment and who subsequently struggle on reduced payments when they are paying back their advance loan. If press rumours that the pay-back rate will be reduced from 40% to 30% are true, that is welcome, but for me that does not go far enough. Does the fact that we are paying advances to 60% of claimants not tell us that people cannot wait for five weeks, so the system design is flawed? As we are paying taxpayers’ money at the start, let us give them better value for money by making that first payment the actual payment itself, not an advance loan. If our estimation was wrong, we can readjust slightly at the end of the month and claw back any slight overpayment at the end, when the claimant’s life is more settled and their debts are under control. I believe that that would tackle the majority of debt and food bank-related cases that we hear about. Let’s just do it.

As we have heard today multiple times, we need to make sure that universal credit can handle occasions when there are two pay cheques in a long month and ensure that that does not disproportionately affect the following month’s benefit. We should support the Scottish Government trial to see whether split payments give greater support to sufferers of domestic violence, and we need to look again at how universal credit works for self-employed people.

Dr Sarah Wollaston (Totnes) (Con): Totnes has a vibrant arts sector. My hon. Friend will know that many self-employed artists take longer to establish themselves as a business, and there may be great variation, month to month, in what they are paid. In the light of her detailed work, does my hon. Friend have any suggestions about how we can improve the situation for self-employed artists?

Heidi Allen: My hon. Friend is absolutely right: it is a fact that universal credit was not built for self-employed people, and it shows. The monthly assessments do not work and the minimum income floor needs to be looked at again because it typically takes more than a year for people’s businesses to settle down.

To make the existing system really fly, I suspect that we need a boost to IT and admin man and womanpower behind the scenes, because let us make no mistake: universal credit is not yet fully automated. Claiming for childcare costs is a prime example of the manual work that is still being done. That brings me on to how we move legacy claimants across and the regulations that we have still to vote for—in November, I suspect. I am pleased that migration will start a lot later than originally planned, but I and many others still have concerns about the regulations. As a Government, we are choosing, for all the right reasons, to move people—that is people—across to a new system. I fail to see why that should be the complete and utter responsibility of those claimants. I have led on IT transformation projects in business and it would be unheard of for there not to be some kind of automated population of data from the old system to the new. We need to look really seriously into doing that, because it would save us hardship in the long run. Let us not forget that a third of migrated claimants are on ESA—the most vulnerable in society who have some kind of illness or disability—and we should look after them and not let them drop off the system. The population of data should be automatic and there should be no break in those people’s payments at all.

Finally, when people arrive safe and sound on universal credit, the work allowances need to be what they should have been prior to 2015. How in this fair Great Britain
that we call home can we have two families in identical circumstances living next to each other, but one has been protected across through migration and their next-door neighbours are £2,500 worse off a year? That is not Great Britain.

3.26 pm  
Julie Cooper (Burnley) (Lab): Last Friday, I hosted a successful jobs fair in conjunction with my local jobcentre. The event was a huge success, with more than 50 employers attending, together with more than 500 jobseekers. I was really pleased to be doing my bit to help get people into work. I mention that because I always seek to do everything possible to support people into work, because that is the right thing to do. If the Government were genuinely trying to simplify the benefit system and achieve a seamless transition from welfare to work, I would welcome that. However, that is not the situation with which we are faced.

To date, attempts to roll out universal credit have been absolutely shambolic and the sheer incompetence has had a devastating effect on families and individuals who need benefits to live. In the short time available to me, I wish to demonstrate that the problems are not the untypical problems of individuals, but in-built system failures that need to be tackled. I am really concerned about the five-week waiting time. How on earth are families expected to manage five weeks with no income whatsoever? Many of these families have no support mechanisms and I fail to see how making families choose between food and heating is in any way incentivising work.

I am concerned about managed migration, particularly in respect of vulnerable people. We ought to be supporting vulnerable people, not punishing them by making it difficult to transfer from one benefit to the other. I am also worried that the amount that those migrating from legacy benefits will receive under universal credit will be a reduced amount. I hear that an initial transitional top-up will be available for the first payment, but what of the subsequent payments? By definition, these are already some of the poorest people.

I also wish to raise the issue of student loans, which are being classed as income in assessments of entitlement to universal credit. Student loans are, by definition, a loan repayable with interest. Under the legacy system, they did not count as income because they were not income. Then there are the mistakes that are made in administration where overpayments are made and claimants are left with huge debts for which they must take responsibility.

In conclusion, I support a benefits system that helps people into work, but I cannot support a system that sends children to school cold and hungry, or that is doing more to punish the poorest and most vulnerable households than ever it did to help anyone into work.

3.28 pm  
Michael Tomlinson (Mid Dorset and North Poole) (Con): I am pleased to be called to speak in the debate and to be given yet another opportunity to voice my full-hearted support for the universal credit policy. I also warn against some of the voices that we have heard from the Opposition Benches today and from outside this Chamber who have called for universal credit to be scrapped, not least the voice of the shadow Chancellor. We have heard today that that may now be the official policy of the Labour party. That is risky, taking us back to the days when Labour left office. We must never forget that, in 2010, the number of households in which no one worked almost doubled.

I have the privilege of being the chairman of the all-party group for youth employment. Each month, we look at the youth employment statistics—the number of people in work and out of work. We do that because the statistics are important but, of course, what is far more important is the lives of the young people that are transformed as they move into work and are given their first opportunity on the jobs ladder.

Mr Harper: My hon. Friend makes an important point. [Interruption.] If Opposition Members will be quiet, I can ask my short intervention. That will leave more time for them to speak. If they keep hectoring, it will take longer.

Will my hon. Friend confirm that, if we were to go back to the legacy system, what we would effectively be doing, given the withdrawal rates, is increasing the rate of tax on those young people going back into work?

Michael Tomlinson: I am grateful to my right hon. Friend for his intervention. I am sorry that he received the welcome that he did from Opposition Members because he makes a powerful point. Seeing young people’s prospects turned around is one of the greatest privileges of being the chairman of the all-party group. Those prospects will be put at risk if we wind back the clock and return to the legacy system—a system that disincentivised young people and, in fact, people of all ages from getting back into work. There was a marginal equivalent tax rate in excess of 90% and the 16-hour rule effectively disincentivised people of all ages, including young people, from getting back into work.

My hon. Friend the Member for Plymouth, Moor View (Johnny Mercer) made a powerful point about the compassion of Members on the Conservative Benches. The hon. Member for Redcar (Anna Turley) said that this policy was cruel. There is nothing cruel about encouraging those who can work to get into work, just as there is nothing compassionate about trapping people in benefits. This is a progressive policy. It should be welcomed on both sides of the Chamber.

Earlier, my hon. Friend the Member for Cheltenham (Alex Chalk) said that he had gone to Jobcentre Plus and seen the difference that the policy was making for his constituents. My hon. Friend the Member for St Austell and Newquay (Steve Double) made exactly the same point. When we go into our jobcentres, we see the opportunity and positivity from the work coaches, who see that they can now do the job that they wanted to do when they went into it. This policy should be supported.

We have heard from the Employment Minister—I want him to confirm this in his response—that this policy helps people to get into work faster than under the legacy system. It means that, when they are in work, they stay in work longer; they have the potential to earn more and their progression is greater. I would welcome the Minister repeating that in his closing remarks. I invite Members on both sides of the House to support universal credit and to oppose the motion.
3.33 pm  
Rosie Duffield (Canterbury) (Lab): We are here today because this Government are intentionally concealing what they know to be the truth about universal credit. The concealment of impact studies and papers relating to the roll-out of universal credit is an injustice not just to the current recipients of UC, but to each and every future recipient in this country, of which there are thousands.

Those hundreds of thousands of people up and down the UK right now are nervously awaiting their turn for what must feel like a benefits executioner’s block. People are being told time and again that it will not hurt and that the impact of the change will be swift and clean, but we all know that to be untrue. Benefits are being cut and cuts hurt. Universal credit in its current form is a cruel blade and such cuts have a terminal effect. I mean that quite literally, because the bungled roll-out of universal credit is causing severe hardship for many people, at a time when this Government say—to quote the Prime Minister—that “austerity is over”. We have learned three facts this afternoon: first, austerity is not over; secondly, the universal credit roll-out is failing; and thirdly, this Government are concealing the truth about universal credit’s failings.

When the Secretary of State for Work and Pensions said at the recent Conservative party conference that reports of cuts to budgets were fake news, it is possible that she was a little confused. Perhaps she has not read the reports suggesting that cuts to universal credit will total £3.6 billion a year by 2020. Perhaps she has not read the reports that she has seen, but has so far refused to put before the House, say otherwise. We will not know until she does lay the reports before Parliament, as well as any analysis produced by her Department since 8 January 2018 on the effect of universal credit. That is what we are asking her to do today.

Universal credit was designed to lift people out of poverty. It started with laudable ambition in 2011, with the Government saying that 350,000 children would be taken out of poverty because universal credit would have higher take-up and wider entitlement than legacy benefits, so might they be willing to tell us today how many hundreds of thousands of children are currently better off for their families being on universal credit? They will not, because almost none are—far from it, in fact. As we have heard this afternoon, organisations such as the Child Poverty Action Group know that 4.5 million children in Britain are living in poverty in 2018.

Might the Government be willing to tell us how far they are from achieving their 2011 aim of lifting 600,000 working-age adults out of poverty through the roll-out of universal credit? They will not tell us because, instead of 600,000 people being better off, we have a system that has allowed rent arrears to climb, food bank referrals to spiral and thousands of adults to be plunged into despair, turning to friends, family and charity for help when they cannot pay the bills to keep them warm.

3.36 pm  
Maggie Throup (Erewash) (Con): Yet again we are debating universal credit and yet again I feel as if we are in a parallel universe in this House. However, I am convinced that every single MP wants the very best for their constituents, which is why we all get passionate about this issue.

My constituency of Erewash has had full roll-out for some time now, and universal credit is working. Prior to universal credit being rolled out, much of my surgery time was taken up with sorting out tax credit issues. I am still sorting out some of these historical cases and it is a nightmare, but my surgeries have changed since full roll-out of universal credit. I am pleased to say that they are not full of universal credit cases. I am not going to deny that there are some, but the proportion of such cases in relation to other issues has completely changed compared with the situation before universal credit.

I pay tribute to the staff at my local jobcentres in Long Eaton and Ilkeston. It is because of their hard work and commitment to those who need their support that universal credit is working in Erewash. I am sure that the jobcentre staff and claimants alike would not want to return to the previous system, which was clunky and, more importantly, did not encourage people to return to work, as we have heard from quite a few Conservative Members this afternoon. My local jobcentre staff tell me that more people are getting into work and, more importantly, staying in work as a result of universal credit; they no longer have to sign on and sign off.

In the run-up to this debate, I have received numerous emails from constituents on the subject of universal credit, many of which are identical. Sadly, someone has misinformed them about many aspects of the system. One element of universal credit that has been adjusted since April is that of housing benefit. It is often the housing element that causes problems in Erewash. But now claimants already on housing benefit will continue to receive their award for the first two weeks of their universal credit claim. I thank the Government for making those changes. In addition, the Government have promised to make it easier for claimants to request that their housing element be paid directly to their landlord, so the Government are listening.

Universal credit is working in Erewash and, more importantly, more of my constituents are working too.

3.39 pm  
Jessica Morden (Newport East) (Lab): On behalf of all the constituents who have contacted me about a range of difficulties to do with their experience of the universal credit system, I reiterate the calls in this debate to halt the roll-out, fix the problems identified so far, and fully fund this policy so that universal credit claimants do not bear the brunt of the Government’s cuts.

Following the Secretary of State’s alleged remarks to the Cabinet that some families will be £200 per month worse off, which is a significant loss, she is now talking about a slower managed migration that will start later next year, and claims to be listening and learning along the way. Well, I do not want my constituents, particularly those with disabilities and mental health problems being moved on to ESA, to have to go through hardship so that the Government can learn from them; I want the Government to learn the lessons now.

This is clearly not a system that is ready for full migration. New claimants and people with changes to their circumstances—the roll-out started with them—should be the easier cases, but we have already seen long delays in processing and payment, driving people to food banks, with social landlords and private landlords reporting not only a dramatic increase in people going into rent arrears but bigger arrears. I urge the Minister to look at
the evidence on this from Community Housing Cymru, and specifically to look at the issue of the two-week run-on of housing benefit, which is not always working in my constituency cases.

As Mind has pointed out, there is huge anxiety out there among those who are going from ESA on to universal credit. Mind says that the Government safeguards for vulnerable people are not good enough. I say that on behalf of a constituent who is hugely worried about the process. Housebound, with no computer, they have to apply for universal credit and, without very close support, they are at risk of losing the benefit. No one should have their benefit stopped until their universal credit claim has been successfully submitted.

I ask the Minister to look at the specific issue of under 25-year-olds with children who are being paid at the under 25-year-olds’ rate, not at the normal rate as under tax credits. That will increase child poverty.

I want to raise the issue of a single mother in my constituency who loves her permanent, part-time job in Workforce Support, which says that the Government safeguards for vulnerable people are not good enough. I say that on behalf of a constituent who is hugely worried about the process. Housebound, with no computer, they have to apply for universal credit and, without very close support, they are at risk of losing the benefit. No one should have their benefit stopped until their universal credit claim has been successfully submitted.

I have huge respect for DWP staff out there having to deliver this. It is the policy that is flawed, and I know they are doing their best, despite the cuts, to help people. We should thank them. As a constituent said to me yesterday, there is nothing wrong with the idea of simplifying the benefits system, but instead it is being used as an exercise in saving money at a cost to those who can least afford it. It is time to halt it, fix it and put the funding in.

3.42 pm

Peter Aldous (Waveney) (Con): The full roll-out of universal credit in Lowestoft that started in May 2016 has not been straightforward. Almost from the outset, my office received a very large number of complaints, some of which have been addressed through working with the DWP, the council and Citizens Advice. However, it is clear that many people, often the most vulnerable in society, have been put under enormous pressure and have faced real challenges in getting by on a day-to-day basis.

One of the main challenges initially faced was rent arrears in the private rented sector. This has been addressed, to a large extent, by the changes that make it easier for landlords to receive direct payments. This, together with the additional funding introduced in last year’s Autumn Budget, has been helpful and has addressed many problems. The roll-out has presented a significant challenge to local DWP staff, who have had to acquire new skills to work with people in a completely different way from the way they worked in the past. They have risen to this challenge. It is vital, going forward, that the necessary support and training are available as the Government move on to the managed migration phase of the roll-out.

What has emerged from the roll-out is the vital importance of the DWP working with local authorities, Citizens Advice and other voluntary organisations. Over the past two years, the east Suffolk universal credit support partnership has evolved. This grouping is co-ordinated by Waveney District Council and is providing vital support to universal credit customers. That includes budgeting and digital support, special disability advice and liaison with landlords. The creation of the partnership means that the area is better placed to handle the increase in demand that will emerge from the managed migration. It was, therefore, very disappointing that on 1 October Waveney District Council was advised that it would no longer be asked to provide universal support and from that date Citizens Advice would deliver that service. I have nothing but praise for Citizens Advice, but local support requirements should be decided locally and not through a top-down, one-size-fits-all approach.

The torrent of complaints that my office was receiving in 2016 and early 2017 has reduced, but it would be wrong to say that it is now down to a trickle. We probably receive three new complaints per week, most of which revolve around the migration from ESA to universal credit. Some of the complaints are resolved quickly, while others are not. The latter largely revolve around customers who are placed in serious financial difficulty as a result of the withdrawal of severe disability payments. That shortcoming needs to be addressed. With managed migration, the Government need to move very gradually, learning and adapting as they go along.

Yvonne Fovargue (Makerfield) (Lab): Wigan became a pathfinder because it wanted to influence the design and delivery of universal credit, while being guaranteed that no individual would lose out, and it has identified problems. Full service roll-out began in April, and there has been a steady increase in claims. We currently have 7,000 claimants, nearly 3,000 of whom are council tenants. Around 22,000 people are likely to eventually migrate to universal credit, most of them in work.

The challenges are many. Tenants on universal credit have a 97% likelihood of going into arrears, a 90% likelihood of breaching £200 in arrears and a 60% likelihood of breaching £600 in arrears. Much of that is due to the waiting period and, in many cases, delays. An eight-week delay is not unusual in Wigan, and that leads to an average £600 in arrears for a council tenant. The waiting period, as my right hon. Friend the Member for East Ham (Stephen Timms) said, is completely unreasonable. Some 16 million people nationally have less than £100 in savings. They can ask for an advance, but it is repaid at 40%. A Government agency does not have to do affordability checks, which even payday lenders have to do.

Food banks in Wigan have seen a massive increase in demand. Since the roll-out in April, the already high demand has increased by 50%. Some 112 people a month in Wigan ask for help from a range of council services with universal credit and complex benefit issues, and 92% of those people say they have no food or money due to delays in payment. If we couple the roll-out of universal credit with the slashing of local welfare schemes, we have a perfect storm.

Wigan has used the pathfinder trials to build up a network of support agencies, but it feels that the primary purpose of helping the DWP to design a system that is fit for purpose has not been achieved. There is no proof in pathfinders and pilots unless lessons are learned. So what is the purpose of a pause? Will Ministers return to the pilots and learn the lessons? Will they listen to the agencies, which say that there are systemic problems?
“We will simplify the benefits system”—I have heard that many times over the years, and no one could disagree that we should, but two decades as a CAB manager has taught me that people’s lives are complicated. The system has to be flexible and person-centred and allow for a vast range of circumstances. It has to be easy to access; there have to be enough resources—staff and computer systems—to allow it to operate from day one; and no vulnerable group should be worse off by the implementation. I am afraid that universal credit is failing on all three of those tests.

3.48 pm

Alex Burghart (Brentwood and Ongar) (Con): I am grateful to have the opportunity to speak in the debate.

The real reason we are talking about universal credit and welfare reform is a desire to get more people into work. This is not because of some accountancy-driven exercise. It is because work is a fundamental social good that helps people to provide for themselves. [Interruption.] The hon. Member for Wirral South (Alison McGovern) says that that is wrong. It is remarkable to take issue with the idea that work is a social good, and I assume she does not actually believe that.

Universal credit was designed to help people to move into and progress in work, and studies of it have repeatedly shown that it is capable of doing just that. That does not mean that it is without need of improvement. Indeed, I have been honoured to be part of the process of improving it. The work that I did with my colleagues on the Work and Pensions Committee in advance of the Budget in November last year led to a series of improvements that have greatly enhanced the way that universal credit serves the people on it. We have seen advance payments increased from a maximum of 50% to 100%, and the repayment period has been extended from six months to 12 months. The seven-day waiting period has been removed, and claimants already on housing benefit have continued to receive their award for the first two weeks of their universal credit claim.

Eddie Hughes (Walsall North) (Con): Universal credit is actually coming to Willenhall in my constituency today. What advice would my hon. Friend give to my constituents? Should they be scared by the scaremongering that they have heard from Opposition Members, or encouraged that they will be helped back into work?

Alex Burghart: My hon. Friend raises a very important point. I can say that universal credit was rolled out in my constituency a number of months ago, and it is working extremely well. We have had nothing but praise for it from the work coaches who administer it, and we have had very high satisfaction rates from people using it in Brentwood and Ongar.

As I say, there is always something to do to improve any system. That is why the test-and-learn approach adopted by this Government is absolutely right, and why the pace of the roll-out has been absolutely right. A very small number of people in my constituency felt they were not given enough information about the application process, so they did not fill in the forms in the right way. They fell foul of the system, and they found themselves not receiving benefits when they expected to and falling into debt. That is exactly the sort of support that I hope Citizens Advice, under its new contract with the DWP, will be able to provide. It is another example of how the Government have responded to the system as it has rolled out and improved on it.

We have to remember that the benefit system being introduced now is a dynamic system, so comparing it with like is extremely difficult. If we have an old, legacy system that actively discourages people from taking on more work and we compare it with a system that helps people move into work and take on more work, a direct comparison, which is what a lot of studies have done, is absolutely inadequate.

In their negotiations with the Chancellor in advance of the Budget, Ministers should discuss with the Treasury the possibilities of reviewing the carry-over of debt from HMRC, restoring work allowances and extending further the advance repayment schedule. My hon. Friend the Member for South Cambridgeshire (Heidi Allen) made a very good point about how we might be able to front-load those payments officially, because we do not want people falling into trouble as they enter the system.

Lastly, I make a plea again for the importance of universal support. This part of the system has the potential to help people overcome very complex problems and move into work, so benefiting themselves and their families.

3.52 pm

Ged Killen (Rutherglen and Hamilton West) (Lab/Co-op): It is clear to me that there is no doubt this Government’s roll-out of universal credit has been a disaster. In my constituency, Rutherglen and Cambuslang food bank has reported a 50% year-on-year increase in demand at the food bank. In the past four months, there has been a 22% increase in demand compared with the previous year; universal credit full service started this time last year. I have spoken to the people who run the food bank, and they do not say, as the Government do, that there are multiple, complex factors for the increase in food bank use; they identify one key culprit: universal credit.

When I asked the Government whether they would consider independent research to investigate the growing use of food banks, they said they would review only existing evidence, not take it upon themselves to investigate further. They say that universal credit is about helping people to get back into work and stay in work, citing favourable employment figures, but so many working people who are claiming universal credit are still forced to rely on food banks. If someone is working but cannot afford to put food on the table, that is not a job; it is exploitation.

Instead of citing employment figures that hide the reality, why do the Government not start investigating and reporting the figures on food bank use? Why do the Government not give themselves the target of reversing that increasing reliance? That would be a true measure of success or failure. If they will not do that, the very least they should do is to listen to what we are calling for today. If it is such a good system, let us see the analysis of the impact on household income and debt.

Yesterday, the Employment Minister appeared not fully to understand my question about employees who get paid every four weeks, rather than per calendar month. This has been raised several times this afternoon. These people’s salaries are split across 13 payments in

[ Yvonne Fovargue ]
the year, so many people will be paid twice in November. If they are universal credit claimants, that will register as one calendar month during which their earnings have been too high, so they will lose their award across Christmas and will have to reapply afterwards. This system is so good at supporting people into work that it cannot recognise a widely used payroll system.

The Government say that they have a test-and-learn approach, yet from what I can see they are not doing very much learning. Instead, they have sought to tinker around the edges, testing it on people’s lives. I know that Government Members will have constituents who have been blighted by this system. I call on them to do the right thing and support our motion. If they will not do so for their constituents, perhaps they will do so for their party, because this has already been referred to by previous Conservative Prime Ministers as the next poll tax. Please listen to our concerns, ask for the analysis and support the motion.

3.55 pm

Richard Graham (Gloucester) (Con): It is a pleasure to speak in this important, if familiar, debate. I regret the way that it was framed by the Opposition spokesperson, because this should not be a hugely political issue. When unemployment and youth unemployment are at record lows and 4 million people have been taken out of income tax altogether, through the doubling of the tax-free allowance, it is not the time to question the principle of the work and welfare reforms that this Government have rightly introduced. No Opposition Member has tried to defend the situation that existed in 2010, when people were better off on benefits or working a maximum of 16 hours a week.

Let us focus, as many Members on both sides of the Chamber have, on whether the roll-out of universal credit is working effectively. The situation is different in different constituencies, so let me share the facts from mine. In Gloucester, we have 3,440 constituents on universal credit. About 150 have sought help from our citizens advice office, of whom about 100 have had difficulties with their applications—something that I hope the new contract between the DWP and Citizens Advice will help to resolve. I have had 17 constituents contact my office for help with universal credit, out of over 12,000 who have been in touch with my office over the past year. I am not saying that the roll-out is perfect, but I am putting it in context and perspective.

The hon. Member for Airdrie and Shotts (Neil Gray) referred to the experts out there, but I do not accept that they know better than we do what is happening in our constituencies. I know what is going on in my constituency, as he will in his, better than the lobbying groups, one of which has produced a template that one of my constituents sent to me. It tells me that she is worried about what will happen when she moves on to universal credit. Her email, which comes from the lobbying group, says, “I will face at least 5 weeks without any money, if I am lucky.” That is complete nonsense. If she is in real trouble, she will be advanced money within 24 hours.

Nigel Huddleston (Mid Worcestershire) (Con): My hon. Friend is making a valid point. Conservative Members do listen and do care. We are also a very pragmatic bunch of people, so if there is evidence that more money or further changes are needed, we will support that.

Richard Graham: My hon. Friend is absolutely right. That brings me to my next point. It is important that the Government continue to listen and to make the changes that were needed over the past three years, as my hon. Friend the Member for South Cambridgeshire (Heidi Allen) mentioned, particularly on the housing element, the speed with which some of our constituents get their first payment and reassuring private sector landlords of the value of having tenants on universal credit on their books.

Neil Parish (Tiverton and Honiton) (Con): We all believe in universal credit, but we also realise that it deals with some of the people in society who are most challenged with their income. It is about ensuring that we get the money to them quickly and listen to what is happening. I believe that we are, but we need to carry on listening to what is happening.

Geraint Davies (Swansea West) (Lab/Co-op): On a point of order, Madam Deputy Speaker. The Member who just spoke has only just come in. There is very limited time—

Madam Deputy Speaker (Dame Eleanor Laing): Order. The hon. Gentleman does not have a right of reply. He is here and that is the end of it.

Richard Graham: Thank you, Madam Deputy Speaker. I was trying to make two crucial points. First, scaremongering is being organised by certain lobbying groups who are sending emails to our constituents that, frankly, they should be ashamed of. I would like the Minister later on to confirm that this sentence is as untrue as the one I read out earlier: “I’ve read that the Prime Minister has said that people will be protected when they transfer to Universal Credit”.

That is correct as far as it goes, but it goes on to say: “the draft rules the government have published show that won’t happen if the first attempt to claim isn’t successful.”

I invite the Minister, when he sums up, to confirm that that is simply not true.

The most important point in this important exercise of rolling out universal credit successfully across the country is that the Government continue to look at what is working well and replicate it, and at what is not working so well and take the opportunity to improve it, so that, for example, constituents with learning disabilities get all the help they need with their applications.

The proposal from the shadow Chancellor, the man who would foment the overthrow of capitalism, that the solution is simply to get rid of universal credit and reverse us back into a world where people were better off on benefits than in work and had no incentive to work more than 16 hours a week would be a catastrophic decision that I do not believe Opposition Members agree with or would do if they thought it through carefully. I will not support the motion.
4.1 pm

**Dan Carden** (Liverpool, Walton) (Lab): Thank you, Madam Deputy Speaker, for giving me the opportunity to contribute to this very important debate. It is interesting to follow the hon. Member for Gloucester (Richard Graham). I am sure 38 Degrees will want to run all their campaigns past him in future. Actually, I think the lines he read out are absolutely true. People are expected to go five weeks without money. I will be responding to those campaigns with sympathy and agreement.

Ministers have taken what was an agreed principle to simplify the benefits system and have lost the support of the House. We have heard Government Members willing to raise criticisms today, but it is a shame that they will not have the courage to support the motion on the Order Paper and to uncover the evidence that Ministers have but the House does not. I raise these issues today because of what I see on the streets of Liverpool and in my office.

I see this issue very much in the context of austerity. Universal credit, since the cuts of the former Chancellor, is now another vehicle for austerity. Those cuts are ploughed on top of 64% cuts to Liverpool’s local authority. There are now reports that Liverpool has the second-highest levels of destitution in the whole UK. Our local authority has to spend £50 million on benefit support services and £3 million on benefit maximisation, and it has spent £1 million over the past two years topping up housing payments for already inadequate benefits to stop people being put on to the streets. That is the context in which universal credit is being implemented in my constituency.

In June, the National Audit Office found: “Universal Credit is failing to achieve its aims, and there is currently no evidence that it ever will.”

This is not social security as we know it or as it should be. It is not a safety net for our most vulnerable constituents and it is certainly not a welfare state. It is a modern-day digital workhouse for people like my constituent Ann, in Everton, who went 10 weeks without any payment. When she was in distress, she was told to go to the local foodbank. When she could not work the online system, she was sanctioned for three months in a row.

For me, this is all about getting to the bottom of the issue facing our most vulnerable constituents. Nothing less than stopping the roll-out of universal credit to fix the problems will do.

4.4 pm

**Paul Masterton** (East Renfrewshire) (Con): There are currently about 330 claimants of universal credit in East Renfrewshire. We moved to full service last month and there are about 5,200 people on legacy benefits who will be migrated to it in the coming months and years. There is no doubt that the phased roll-out has identified a number of issues which need to be addressed. My hon. Friend the Member for Amber Valley (Nigel Mills) set out very well why the Government were right to proceed cautiously through test and learn. I start by paying huge tribute to the work of the team at Barrhead jobcentre, whom the Secretary of State visited over the summer. They really are changing people’s lives for the better, and we in this House cannot pay testament to the frontline staff in jobcentres enough.

The principles that underpin universal credit were well set out by my right hon. Friend the Member for Witham (Priti Patel) and it is very easy to see why they have carried near-universal support. One of the reasons was that under the old system, as we have heard today, people who wanted more work would be penalised for doing so, which was a completely ridiculous situation.

One group who have not been mentioned today but who will benefit from universal credit are injured veterans. Under existing legacy benefits, those in receipt of such benefits, as well as payments through the war disablement pension or the armed forces compensation scheme, receive a statutory £10 disregard, but under UC, unearned income such as these benefits is completely ignored. There are 12,000 veterans across Scotland—120 are in East Renfrewshire—who receive compensation because of their injuries, and they will be better off under universal credit. That is something we should all welcome.

Other Members have set out the improvements that were made to universal credit last year, particularly in the Budget. Those have gone a long way to helping things. Coupled with the recent introduction of the two week run-on of housing benefit, this will help to safeguard those migrating from housing benefit to UC from rent arrears.

Despite these improvements, further progress is still required. In the lead-up to the Budget, the Government should now reinstate work allowances for single-parent families and second earners in families with children back to the level they were before the 2015 Budget, because the changes to those groups undermined the fundamental purpose of universal credit—to make work pay. This would provide targeted support to 9.6 million low-income families, like many in my constituency, and it would be the best way to ensure that UC is truly transformative, as it was always intended to be.

**Ruth George**: There never were any work allowances for second earners in couple households. Is the hon. Gentleman proposing that a new allowance should be introduced, which I am sure Opposition Members would absolutely support because of the high marginal tax rates on such families?

**Paul Masterton**: I was mainly talking about single-parent families, but I know of the work that the hon. Lady has done. We have both had discussions with the Joseph Rowntree Foundation—I think we sat around a table together when we were talking about some of its Budget asks—and I warmly welcome the work that it does and support a lot of its asks in advance of the Budget.

As MPs, we always see the worst of a system—nobody comes to our surgeries or pops into our offices to say how wonderful things are, how easy their application process was or how great it is—and those cases are frustrating and maddening, and we do our job to fix them. However, we also need to take account of the many, many people for whom this has worked. I am very pleased to be hosting a UC information event later this month, working with the citizens advice bureau, the jobcentre, my local credit unions and my local housing associations. I want people to know that they can come to me if they have a problem and that they can sit on the day and get help with their application. If they are having an issue, we will have lines set up directly to the DWP hotline and the HMRC hotline so that when people come—on Friday 26 October—to the Voluntary Action on Kelburn Street in Barrhead, they know that they have an MP whom they can come to for support if it is not working.
UC is a good benefit. It is the right thing to do. To scrap it and to go back to a system that traps people on welfare would be a mistake.

4.8 pm

Alison McGovern (Wirral South) (Lab): I will be brief; I have three points to make. First, after listening to today’s debate, I feel that we have been having the same debate every year that I have been in this House. From speaking to more experienced colleagues than me, I know that the debate about tax credits and whether they worked and how they should be changed is one that we keep having. I am happy to discuss the legacy systems, and what went right and what went wrong. We have been doing so for the past decade, but that is not the point.

What we are talking about today—this is my second point—is a fundamental dilemma in our economy. We have a three-way policy choice between employment, wages and poverty. We all want employment to go up and people to be in work, but we cannot expect wages on their own to cover the cost of life. That is what we are seeing at the moment. While wages have not gone up—[ Interruption. ] The hon. Gentleman on the Front Bench says that that is ridiculous. Well, he should listen and he should go back to the Beveridge report, because exactly that point was proved: if someone has children, if they are sick or disabled, and if they are old, their wages will not cover the cost of life. The welfare state is there to smooth people’s income over their lives so that in periods of high cost they do not fall into poverty. That brings me to the third part of this dilemma. If the state does not step in to make sure that the welfare state can do what it is supposed to do, work and wages alone will not stop poverty, and that is what is going on.

I ask Ministers: how high does child poverty have to go before they step in? [ Interruption. ] That is not the case. The Government just changed the definition of poverty. Other Members have listed the organisations that have given ample evidence on poverty to Ministers. Unless the state steps in to fulfil Beveridge’s vision and takes account of the cost of having children, we will always see people falling into poverty. That is a fundamental truth of how our economy works.

I leave the final words to my brilliant staff, Jay Glover, Debbie Caine and Rob Buckingham, who have seen food bank use in my constituency go from nothing to a situation now where it is rife. At the end of every month, there is a spike in demand for food bank vouchers, and they are left dealing with the mess that universal credit is creating. Unlike my hon. Friend the Member for Liverpool, Walton (Dan Carden), who is a good friend of mine, we in Wirral South never expected to see food bank usage rife in our area, which is more mixed than his, and yet here we are with this pain and stress every month, and this Government, I am afraid, are to blame.

4.11 pm

James Cartlidge (South Suffolk) (Con): It is a pleasure to follow the hon. Member for Wirral South (Alison McGovern), although I remind her that one of the key tenets of the Beveridge report is that the welfare system should not contain perverse disincentives to work, yet that is a problem in the legacy system we have had to deal with.

I want to focus on two key phrases we have heard a lot today: managed migration and the end of austerity. When I talk about managed migration, I refer not to the benefits system but to immigration into the UK. People outside, if they heard this debate, would think we were in a parallel universe. We are on the cusp of new immigration rules that will be much tougher on the unskilled. As hon. Friends have said, there are 800,000 vacancies, and we know we have a heavy dependency on migrant labour. [ Interruption. ] Hon. Members might want to reflect on this. In those circumstances, it is paramount that the welfare system does everything possible to encourage the British population into work, rather than putting barriers in their place, because we will need them more and more.

The system must encourage people on part-time hours to work longer hours and the unemployed to take work, and for those who are economically inactive, for whatever reason, it should provide that strong one-to-one support, which is at the core of universal credit, to ensure they can overcome the barriers and make a productive difference to this country, instead of our becoming ever more reliant on migrant labour. That is fundamental.

On the phrase “end of austerity”, the Prime Minister timed it beautifully. In economic history, when we refer to austerity, we mean wages and people’s available income, not public spending, which of course the Labour party is obsessed with. What statistics have we seen this week? Wage growth is at its highest in almost a decade; as we heard today, inflation is falling; and unemployment is still at record lows. We on the Conservative Benches should be extremely proud of that record. I put it to everyone that we are doing the right thing.

The UK’s big failing in economic history has been to have lower wages per head than similar economies, and we on the Conservative Benches are going to deal with it, and deal with it in the right way, not by increasing dependency and unsustainable benefit payments, but by giving people incentives to get into work and make the most of the talents they were born with so that they can stand on their own two feet, instead of relying on an ever-expanding state.

4.13 pm

Dame Louise Ellman (Liverpool, Riverside) (Lab/Co-op): Many speakers have highlighted the problems that universal credit is causing people on the ground day after day, yet the Government fail to recognise the reality and admit that universal credit is in serious trouble. I am extremely concerned at the prospect of the full roll-out of universal credit in Liverpool, Riverside. According to the House of Commons Library, 2,000 people in my constituency are concerned at the prospect of the full roll-out of universal credit in Liverpool, Riverside. According to the House of Commons Library, 2,000 people in my constituency are in receipt of universal credit now, with 13,300 to go. What can they expect? The evidence suggests that they can expect “managed migration”, which is a curious term in this context. It means that when universal credit is introduced, there is no automatic transfer for people who are receiving existing benefits. They must make new applications, and 30% of applications are not completed because people have problems applying online.

Landlords in Liverpool are already approaching me and telling me that they do not want to let their properties to people on universal credit because they are concerned about mounting arrears and failure to pay. People face the prospect of increasing debt, increasing use of food banks, and increasing stress. Stress has not been mentioned
much this afternoon, but it is an extremely important issue, not just for people with existing mental health problems, but for people who are struggling to survive as more and more pressures are imposed on them. People will be worse off: according to the Resolution Foundation, 3.2 million working families will lose £48 a week on universal credit.

The Government must stop pretending that all is well. They must halt this roll-out. There must be full disclosure of what is really happening. The Government must act now.

4.16 pm

**Vicky Ford** (Chelmsford) (Con): As I have listened to the debate, it has struck me that it is important to remember that we are talking not just about a system, but about people.

I remember two people who strongly influenced my decision to go into politics. This was back in 2005, when the then Government had just introduced the working tax credit. I had taken some time off work, and was volunteering at the local pre-school. One of those two people worked there. She loved her job, and she was brilliant with the kids. Now she was in tears because her partner had left her, and she could not afford to work any more. She was better off on benefits.

The second person, like the first, was a mum with young kids. She was also in tears. Vast amounts had been overpaid to her under the tax credit system, and now the taxman was asking her to repay thousands of pounds. She was one of those individuals who were caught in that system under Labour, when literally billions of pounds were overpaid to vulnerable people who were then asked to give the money back.

It is right for us to look at the present system again, because it is too complicated. Currently, 700,000 people are not receiving the benefits to which they are entitled. We cannot have the chaos that was caused when Labour introduced its last changes. It is right for us to have a new system that does not trap people on welfare. It is right for us to have a simpler system that is easier to use, and it is right for it to be rolled out step by step to small groups of people at a time, so that there is no repeat of that chaos. It is also absolutely right for us to be honest with people. Benefits affect some of our most vulnerable, and we must not scare people who are about to see changes.

Some of the universal credit system has not been perfect, but changes have been made. The offer of advanced payouts and the scrapping of the seven-day waiting period mean that people can have cash in their pockets, and I am glad to learn that the two-week advance of housing benefit is also helping. Ministers have said repeatedly that they are open to suggestions as to how to make changes as we proceed, and they are about to introduce a swathe of improvements. Before we get to the mass migration, I want us to ensure that those with mental health conditions will be helped, and the Government said yesterday that that would happen.

Let us all stop playing political games. We need a safer system, and we need to make it work.

4.19 pm

**Mr Tanmanjeet Singh Dhesi** (Slough) (Lab): Members might be familiar with an excellent book by Anthony King and Ivor Crewe called “The Blunders of our Governments”.

It is a catalogue of expensive Government mistakes from the poll tax to the NHS reorganisation, and when a new edition appears I have no doubt that a whole chapter will be dedicated to the Government’s botched implementation of UC.

The Resolution Foundation states that 3.2 million people will be at least £50 a week worse off. That will push millions from just about managing into utter misery. That is why the Government must release the official impact assessment showing how people’s incomes would be affected by UC: no more secrecy, we must get to the truth.

Why are Ministers deaf to the people’s pleas? Is it because these are the voices of the poor, the dispossessed, the excluded? Surely one of the lessons we learned from the tragedy of Grenfell, of which Ministers will be well aware, is that when working-class communities warn us of impending disaster, we must pay heed. When the people speak, this Parliament must listen and act.

Let me add to the litany of shame we have heard from hon. Members today with three examples from my own Slough constituency: three cases within a two-week period in September 2018. One concerns an adult with learning disabilities who was told she did not have the right to reside and was denied UC; she actually had a permanent residence certificate. Secondly, a mother with young children, fleeing domestic violence, was told she was ineligible for UC when she was in fact eligible. Thirdly, a carer of a daughter with serious mental illness has been denied UC under residence criteria. This constituent is reliant on the local food bank and other support from Slough Borough Council. She is still waiting to hear. The pattern seems to be that DWP assessors are simply unaware of the different ways an EEA national might be eligible for UC and are refusing cases without asking the right questions and fully investigating circumstances. When the Minister responds, perhaps he will address this specific point about eligibility criteria for EEA nationals, and whether he has confidence that the rules are being fairly applied.

Today Ministers can do the right thing by not shovelling more taxpayers’ cash on the bonfire, by not hoping, like Wilkins Micawber, that something might turn up, and by not leaking and briefing, and dissembling and distracting, but by ending this nonsense now. They must release the impact assessment, halt the roll-out, and help those being hammered in Slough and elsewhere with immediate emergency payments, and avoid yet another cruel, costly and unnecessary Government blunder.

4.22 pm

**Stephen Kerr** (Stirling) (Con): It is a pleasure to follow the hon. Member for Slough (Mr Dhesi). This has been in large measure a very thoughtful debate. I enjoyed, and would wish to be associated with, the remarks of my hon. Friends the Members for South Cambridgeshire (Heidi Allen) and for Amber Valley (Nigel Mills), and the right hon. Member for East Ham (Stephen Timms) who made a particularly thoughtful and positive contribution, and my hon. Friend the Member for East Renfrewshire (Paul Masterton). However, a number of speeches have, frankly, just been scaremongering, and the last thing the most vulnerable people in our society need is scaremongering from their elected representatives.

We have responsibilities, and I feel the first responsibility I have as Member of Parliament for Stirling when people come, as they do, to my surgeries because of
Unable to eat properly and unable to travel to interviews, from the council, but was left with £4 a week to live on. However, universal credit would not cover the cost of her renting a small bedroom in Forth Housing Association and Stirling Rural Housing Association. There are many other agencies as well, such as Stirling District Women’s Aid. We have tried in Stirling to create a circle of concern for people who are vulnerable and need help, and it works.

Just a few weeks ago it was my great pleasure to welcome the Secretary of State to Stirling, and I wish to confirm, by my own witness, what has been said by others, which is that this ministerial team listens to the concerns of people. They are authentic, genuine and responsive, and I pay particular tribute to the Secretary of State. Because of her leadership, things are changing and improving, and I give credit where it is due.

Those of us on the Government Benches make no apology for committing ourselves to the principle that work should be at the heart of our benefit system. The way we will reduce and eradicate poverty is through the principle of work, and the way we will lead productive lives is by being able to direct ourselves towards productive work. As Conservatives, we make no apology for that principle. To think that it would be in any way moral to leave people trapped and dependent on a benefit system that provides disincentives for them to work is completely wrong, and I am grateful to be a proponent of universal credit.

Several hon. Members rose—

Madam Deputy Speaker (Dame Eleanor Laing): Order. I am trying to give as many people as possible the chance just to make a point. The time limit is therefore going down to two minutes. I see that Mr Toby Perkins is not standing, so I call Rosena Allin-Khan.

Dr Rosena Allin-Khan (Tooting) (Lab): Universal credit was rolled out in parts of Tooting a year ago, as it was in many other parts of the country, and the results have been devastating. That devastation is reflected not only in the number of weeks that people have waited for payments or the amount by which they will be worse off; the real devastation is in the damage that it is causing to people’s lives. I am going to share some accounts with the House—I have deliberately changed the names involved—and then I want Ministers to tell me honestly that they are not committed to pausing the roll-out of universal credit.

The first case involves Jayne. She had a history of post-traumatic stress disorder and depression, but things were looking up for her and she had secured a job. Unfortunately, she was made redundant and so applied for universal credit. However, universal credit would not cover the cost of her renting a small bedroom in Tooting. She applied for a discretionary housing payment from the council, but was left with £4 a week to live on. Unable to eat properly and unable to travel to interviews, her mental health issues spiralled. The second case involves Monica. Again, I have changed her name. She too had mental health issues and suffered from blood clots on her lungs. She could not afford her daily medication, and she attempted suicide.

In the 50 seconds I have remaining, I am going to ask Ministers to look at me and tell me whether they think that the people of Tooting and of this country deserve better. We are world leaders with a rich economy, yet people here are increasingly using food banks. Whether we like to admit it or not, all Members, on both sides of the Chamber, see people crying before us in our constituency surgeries and saying that they cannot feed their children. The roll-out of universal credit has been instrumental in increasing the number of people relying on food banks. Enough is enough. Today, those of us on the Opposition Benches implore our Government to listen, to take action and to halt the roll-out of universal credit.

4.27 pm

Mike Wood (Dudley South) (Con): I am particularly pleased to see the Minister for financial inclusion, the Under-Secretary of State for Work and Pensions, my hon. Friend the Member for Hexham (Guy Opperman), in the Chamber. He joined me in my constituency over the summer to meet a range of agencies involved in the day-to-day work with people claiming universal credit, which was rolled out there in the middle of last year. What was particularly striking was the evangelism of the jobcentre staff, particularly the work coaches, and the transformation in morale in the jobcentres. That is because the staff, particularly the work coaches, are now finding that they can make a real positive difference to people’s lives by getting them into work.

I do not have time to give the House many case studies, but one involves a gentleman who had returned to this country after working abroad. At his first appointment with the jobcentre, staff identified the fact that his mental health was an issue and that his debt worries were leading to him no longer opening his post. As well as offering work coaching, they were able to ensure that he saw his GP to get his mental health issues addressed, and that he got debt advice and used strategies to deal with those problems. As a result of all that—although not as a result of his first interview—he is now in full-time employment. He has a new confidence and is working in the constituency of my hon. Friend the Member for Solihull (Julian Knight), the Minister’s Parliamentary Private Secretary.

We will all have seen the problems with some of the implementation and execution of universal credit, and it is good to see that that has, to an extent, been addressed since the roll-out began. I hope that the Government will use the time through to the roll-out to look at how universal credit can be improved further. To scrap it now would be a gross betrayal of those whose lives have been turned around.

4.29 pm

Alison Thewliss (Glasgow Central) (SNP): I do not have much time, so I will concentrate on the three myths about this system that the Tories are perpetuating again and again. The first is that we somehow want to go back to the system of legacy benefits, but that is patently nonsense.
The National Audit Office says that we are now past the point of no return and cannot go back. Ellenor in my office is brilliant at helping my constituents navigate the complex system. She has the Child Poverty Action Group book, which is inches thick, and she navigates the system every day and gets people the money they are due. However, the system is incredibly complex, and we need to see universal credit fixed before people are hurt further by the system.

The second is that advance payments are somehow the solution to the problem. They are not. They simply make people rob themselves months in advance, but the Grinch who is stealing Glasgow’s Christmas suggested yesterday that that is what people in Glasgow should do. I spoke to a local primary headteacher in Glasgow last week, and she knows the parents whom she deals with in her school. She knows that they will do absolutely everything they can this Christmas to ensure that they can put food on the table for their kids and that they will get presents, but the cost of that will be severe in January, February, March and all the way through next year. Those families will be in severe debt, and they will not be able to get out of it.

The final myth is that work always pays. Work does not always pay under this Government, it does not always pay under universal credit, and it will not pay for the woman who came to my advice surgery who currently has five children. If she moves on to universal credit, she will be out by £700 a month. There is no way on God’s green earth that she will be able to make that up through work or through any other means. All that universal credit will do is put her family into poverty. The system needs to be fixed, and it needs to be stopped before Glasgow gets into serious trouble.

Dr Caroline Johnson (Sleaford and North Hykeham) (Con): Since time is short, I will stick to discussing one of the important principles of universal credit, which is that hard work should always be rewarded. Anyone who has the drive and the motivation to improve their lot, and themselves and their family should always have the opportunity to do so. No matter where someone grew up, where they come from or what their parents do, they should always be able to aspire to a better future.

Opposition Members have levelled much criticism at the reforms, but the Government are right to roll the system out carefully and to make improvements as necessary. To keep the status quo would be far more harmful than the Opposition would care to admit, because the legacy system was bad for taxpayers and harmful for those on benefits. For that reason, I welcome universal credit, which will ensure that work always pays. No more will someone need to ask whether increasing their hours will make them worse or better off. No longer will someone striving to put more money in their pocket face an effective tax rate of 90% on earnings. No more will generations of people face becoming stuck in a benefits trap, wanting to do more work but facing a financial hit if they do so. Although there may be some issues to iron out, I welcome the fact that the Secretary of State is working closely on them. I also welcome the fact that 1,000 more people are getting into work every single day under this Government.

Toby Perkins (Chesterfield) (Lab): As we approach the end of this debate, the fact that such a huge number of my colleagues are still attempting to catch your eye, Madam Deputy Speaker, speaks more powerfully than any speech we will hear today about the full scale of the catastrophe that universal credit is visiting upon some of our most vulnerable constituents. The truth is that every single one of us will be getting emails from our constituents and, heartbreakingly, when we meet those constituents in our surgeries we see how appallingly badly these people have been treated and how far away many of them are from the world of work.

One of the things that upsets me most about universal credit is that a programme that was designed to get people into work is also making life a misery for people who are a long way from the world of work—those who are never seriously going to be available for work. The system treats those people most brutally. They are the very people we in this place should be defending, but they have done worst out of this system.

The Secretary of State for Health and Social Care got in trouble this weekend for claiming on television that he had not received a single letter from his constituents on universal credit, which I find hard to believe. He was disproved when one of his constituents wrote to the press. Is any Conservative Member willing to put their hand up and say that not a single constituent has got in touch to say that universal credit has made their life worse?

Steve Double rose—

Toby Perkins: I do not have time to take an intervention. Only one Conservative Member claims that not a single constituent has been in touch, so we can take it that every other Conservative Member knows the problems that the Opposition are elucidating. That is the most powerful condemnation of this disgraceful policy.

Geraint Davies (Swansea West) (Lab/Co-op): Previously we had a sophisticated social security system that targeted benefits at those in need. I appreciate that there were issues, but the problems of tapering could have been sorted out within the system.

Universal credit combines three massive computer systems—the Inland Revenue system, the jobcentre system and local council systems—and, inevitably, it will not work. We know the history of public sector computer systems going wrong at the Passport Office, with child benefits and within the national health service. Pushing three computer systems together simply will not work. The whole system is a way of cutting corners and cutting benefits for the most vulnerable.

Universal credit should be scrapped, because it simply will not work. In Swansea and elsewhere it has led to sleepless nights, empty stomachs and shivering families. It is leading to poverty and despair. I believe it is simply a Trojan horse for further cuts. There are already 4 million children in poverty, and another 1 million will be in poverty by 2020. The number of claimants in Swansea has increased by 50%, year on year, to nearly 2,000.

The idea that we have all these jobs, and the like, is not true. In fact, the Government have created part-time jobs or zero-hours jobs from full-time jobs. There are
400,000 fewer people earning over £20,000 than in 2010. The idea that everything is working is not true, and the most impoverished are taking brutal cuts to pay for the bankers’ greed and irresponsibility.

Universal credit is completely wrong. It should be scrapped, and we should go back to a more sensible system.

4.37 pm

Mike Amesbury (Weaver Vale) (Lab): Today’s debate has made it clear to all that rolling out universal credit, even in a slightly different timeframe and in a slightly different manner, will be a disaster for the most vulnerable. It will be a disaster for the disabled—750,000 are forecast to lose out; a disaster for the self-employed—600,000 will lose out; and a disaster for 3.2 million tenants. Families and children will be forced further into debt, hunger and poverty as they lose up to £200 a month and £2,400 a year.

We have had more than 60 speakers in this passionate and generally well-tempered debate. There has been no scaremongering. These are real cases and real people in our communities. My hon. Friend the Member for Rotherham and Hamilton West (Ged Killen) spoke about his experience of universal credit being rolled out in his constituency and of the rise in food bank use.

The right hon. Member for Forest of Dean (Mr Harper) spoke about his rather positive experience of universal credit. While you were speaking, one of your constituents got in touch with me and referred to the 45% increase in food bank use in your constituency—

Madam Deputy Speaker (Dame Eleanor Laing): Order. In his constituency, not in my constituency.

Mike Amesbury: Thank you, Madam Deputy Speaker, for pointing out that the 45% increase in food bank use in the right hon. Gentleman’s constituency is due to universal credit.

Siobhain McDonagh (Mitcham and Morden) (Lab): May I ask my hon. Friend for help on behalf of Paul in my constituency? Paul lost his job in September, his wife died, and he is in pieces. He cannot get her name removed from his UC application. He says that every time he logs on it is 

Mike Amesbury: That is a dreadful and, obviously, very sensitive case. I am sure the Secretary of State and the Minister for Employment will take up that individual case, which demonstrates some of the failings of UC.

My hon. Friend the Member for Birmingham, Ladywood (Shabana Mahmood) referred to the explosion in casework in her constituency as a result of the universal credit roll-out. The hon. Member for Sittingbourne and Sheppey (Gordon Henderson) referred to a lack of money among his constituents and debt problems associated with food banks. My hon. Friend the Member for Wallasey (Ms Eagle) referred to the 34% increase in food bank use as UC was rolled out in her constituency. The hon. Member for Plymouth, Moor View (Johnny Mercer) highlighted concerns about cuts to the in-work allowances, but of course Conservative Members voted for those cuts. My hon. Friend the Member for Garston and Halewood (Maria Eagle) spoke about the chaos for her constituents, particularly with the administration of UC. The list goes on and on.

Ruth George: Will my hon. Friend give way?

Mike Amesbury: I must make some progress.

In among this procedure—the passion and politics of today’s debate—let us not forget that for millions of people universal credit is more than just a policy; it is a daily reality. That reality is insecurity. It is fear, hunger and, all too often, homelessness. Despite our political differences, I cannot believe that Members came into this House to support a policy that is causing such horrors to increase. I know that I did not and I can tell from the genuine contributions of so many Members in the House today that neither did they. So I say to the Secretary of State: she has heard the stories, she knows the risks of continuing along this road and she must recognise that, when even the architect of universal credit, the right hon. Member for Chingford and Woodford Green (Mr Duncan Smith), says that the system is £2 billion short and this is what is needed, it is time to think again and probably add a few billion more.

The universal credit journey has not just been a bumpy ride; it has been crash after crash. It is a journey that is rapidly running out of road, with a driver, Captain Chaos, who thinks that dropping down a gear at the last minute will prevent catastrophe. The only thing that can halt this is putting the brake on. We need to stop, radically reform and fix this policy before it is too late. Indeed, the policy may well already be beyond fixing. It is certainly already too late for many of the constituents in my patch and beyond. The Government and the Secretary of State have a choice: they can carry on as they are and preside over another poll tax, or they can listen to the unprecedented number of voices from across civil society telling them to stop and think again. Sir John Major believes that universal credit is “operationally messy, socially unfair and unforgiving”.

That assessment is shared by expert after expert, and by thousands who are affected by the policy. Delays and tweaks will not solve this. It is time to stop, fund and fix it.

4.44 pm

The Minister for Employment (Alok Sharma): No one can say that universal credit does not get a decent outing in the House: we debated it at departmental oral questions on Monday; I responded to an urgent question on it yesterday; here we are discussing it again today; and tomorrow I shall appear before the Work and Pensions Committee. It is of course right that we debate, that we as a Department are held to account and that we listen and improve the system—that is what we are doing with universal credit. In her speech, the Secretary of State outlined all the measures we have taken and all the changes we have made over the past months. It has been about benefiting all our constituents who need support.

In this debate, we, and the Opposition in particular, should never lose sight of what it is that we all came into politics to do, which is to improve the lives of our
constituents. In the Department for Work and Pensions, it is about not only supporting those who need support but ultimately helping people into work. Of course, helping people into work is about helping people to earn a wage, but it is often also about much more than that. It is about restoring someone’s self-confidence, giving them their pride back and fuelling that sense of fulfilment that comes from their being able to support themselves and their family. That is precisely what universal credit does. It is a system that supports the vulnerable, that is fair to taxpayers, that is sustainable and, ultimately, that makes work pay.

As a number of my colleagues pointed out, under universal credit, people get into work faster, stay in work longer and earn more. As the latest jobs figures showed yesterday, our policies are working. They are helping people into jobs.

Helen Hayes (Dulwich and West Norwood) (Lab): Will the Minister give way?

Alok Sharma: I will not take interventions. I took around 50 interventions, in effect, from colleagues yesterday, so I hope the hon. Lady does not mind.

Unemployment is at a 43-year record low. Youth unemployment has more than halved since 2010. Wages are growing above inflation for the seventh month in a row. Britain is starting to get a well-deserved pay rise as we come out the other side of the terrible economic legacy that we inherited from the last Labour Government. This is a record that we on the Government Benches are proud of.

We heard some excellent speeches today; let me outline some of the comments that were made. We heard a really thoughtful speech from my right hon. Friend the Member for Forest of Dean (Mr Harper), who pointed out the disaster of the introduction of tax credits. My hon. Friend the Member for Sittingbourne and Sheppey (Gordon Henderson) talked about the enthusiasm and commitment of the staff in his local jobcentre. My hon. Friend the Member for Plymouth, Moor View (Johnny Mercer) made a really passionate speech. I recently visited his local jobcentre with him and he absolutely cares. When he said that the legacy benefits system sapped ambition, he was absolutely right. My hon. Friend the Member for Mid Dorset and North Poole (Michael Tomlinson) reminded us that people were trapped on the legacy benefits system. My hon. Friend the Member for Mid Dorset and North Poole (Michael Tomlinson) reminded us that people were trapped on the legacy benefits system. My hon. Friend the Member for Mid Dorset and North Poole (Michael Tomlinson) reminded us that people were trapped on the legacy benefits system. My hon. Friend the Member for Mid Dorset and North Poole (Michael Tomlinson) reminded us that people were trapped on the legacy benefits system. My hon. Friend the Member for Mid Dorset and North Poole (Michael Tomlinson) reminded us that people were trapped on the legacy benefits system. My hon. Friend the Member for Mid Dorset and North Poole (Michael Tomlinson) reminded us that people were trapped on the legacy benefits system. My hon. Friend the Member for Mid Dorset and North Poole (Michael Tomlinson) reminded us that people were trapped on the legacy benefits system. My hon. Friend the Member for Mid Dorset and North Poole (Michael Tomlinson) reminded us that people were trapped on the legacy benefits system. My hon. Friend the Member for Mid Dorset and North Poole (Michael Tomlinson) reminded us that people were trapped on the legacy benefits system. My hon. Friend the Member for Mid Dorset and North Poole (Michael Tomlinson) reminded us that people were trapped on the legacy benefits system.

We will continue to engage as we move forward for the next phase of universal credit, but playing politics with people’s lives helps no one. We should be working together to support the most vulnerable. I urge the House to reject the motion.

Question put.

The House divided: Ayes 279, Noes 299.

Division No. 243 [4.50 pm]

AYES

Abbott, Rh Ms Diane. . .
Abrahams, Debbie
Ali, Rushanara
Allin-Khan, Dr Rosena
Amesbury, Mike
Antoniazzi, Tonia
Ashworth, Jonathan
Austin, Ian
Bailey, Mr Adrian
Bardell, Hannah.
Barron, rh Sir Kevin
Beckett, rh Margaret
Benn, rh Hilary
Berger, Luciana
Betts, Mr Clive
Black, Mhairi
Blackford, rh Ian
Blackman, Kirsty
Blackman-Woods, Dr Roberta
Blomfield, Paul
Brabin, Tracy
Bradshaw, rh Mr Ben
Brennan, Kevin
Brock, Deidre
Brown, Alan
Brown, Ly
Brown, rh Mr Nicholas
Bryant, Chris
Buck, Ms Karen
Burden, Richard
Burgon, Richard
Butler, Dawn
Cable, rh Sir Vince
Cadbury, Ruth
Cameron, Dr Lisa

Campbell, rh Mr Alan
Campbell, Mr Ronnie
Carden, Dan
Carmichael, rh Mr Alistair
Champion, Sarah
Charalambous, Bambos
Cherry, Joanna
Coaker, Vernon
Coffey, Ann
Cooper, Julian
Cooper, Rosie
Cooper, rh Yvette
Corbyn, rh Jeremy
Cowan, Ronnie
Coye, Neil
Crausby, Sir David
Crawley, Angela
Creagh, Mary
Creasy, Stella
Craddock, Jon
Cryer, John
Cummins, Judith
Cunningham, Alex
Cunningham, Mr Jim
Daby, Janet
Dakin, Nic
Davies, Rh Sir Edward
David, Wayne
Davies, Geraint
Day, Martyn
De Cordova, Marsha
De Piero, Gloria
Dent Coad, Emma
Dhesi, Mr Tanmanjeet Singh
Docherty-Hughes, Martin

Noes

Abbott, Rh Ms Diane. . .
Abrahams, Debbie
Ali, Rushanara
Allin-Khan, Dr Rosena
Amesbury, Mike
Antoniazzi, Tonia
Ashworth, Jonathan
Austin, Ian
Bailey, Mr Adrian
Bardell, Hannah
Barron, rh Sir Kevin
Beckett, rh Margaret
Benn, rh Hilary
Berger, Luciana
Betts, Mr Clive
Black, Mhairi
Blackford, rh Ian
Blackman, Kirsty
Blackman-Woods, Dr Roberta
Blomfield, Paul
Brabin, Tracy
Bradshaw, rh Mr Ben
Brennan, Kevin
Brock, Deidre
Brown, Alan
Brown, Ly
Brown, rh Mr Nicholas
Bryant, Chris
Buck, Ms Karen
Burden, Richard
Burgon, Richard
Butler, Dawn
Cable, rh Sir Vince
Cadbury, Ruth
Cameron, Dr Lisa
Dodds, Anneliese
Doughty, Stephen
Dowd, Peter
Drew, Dr David
Dromey, Jack
Duffield, Rosie
Eagle, Ms Angela
Eagle, Maria
Edwards, Jonathan
Efford, Clive
Elliott, Julie
Ellman, Dame Louise
Elmore, Chris
Esterson, Bill
Evans, Chris
Farrelly, Paul
Farron, Tim
Fellows, Marion
Field, rh Frank
Fitzpatrick, Jim
Flint, rh Caroline
Fovargue, Yvonne
Foxcroft, Vicky
Frith, James
Furman, Gill
Gaffney, Hugh
Gapes, Mike
Gardiner, Barry
George, Ruth
Gethins, Stephen
Gibson, Patricia
Gill, Preet Kaur
Glinson, Mary
Godsiff, Mr Roger
Goodman, Helen
Grady, Patrick
Grant, Peter
Gray, Neil
Greenwood, Lilian
Greenwood, Margaret
Griffith, Nia
Gwynne, Andrew
Haigh, Louise
Hamilton, Fabian
Hanson, rh David
Hardy, Emma
Harman, rh Ms Harriet
Harris, Carolyn
Hayes, Helen
Hayman, Sue
Healey, rh John
Hendry, Drew
Hepburn, Mr Stephen
Hill, Mike
Hiller, Meg
Hobhouse, Wera
Hodge, rh Dame Margaret
Hodgson, Mrs Sharon
Hoey, Kate
Hollem, Kate
Hopkins, Kelvin
Hosie, Stewart
Howarth, rh Mr George
Huq, Dr Rupa
Hussain, Imran
Jardine, Christine
Johnson, Diana
Jones, Darren
Jones, Gerald
Jones, Graham P.
Jones, Helen
Jones, Sarah
Jones, Susan Elan
Kane, Mike
Keeley, Barbara
Kendall, Liz
Khan, Afzal
Kilen, Ged
Kinna, Stephen
Kyle, Peter
Laird, J. Leslie
Lake, Ben
Lamb, rh Norman
Lavery, Ian
Law, Chris
Lee, Karen
Leslie, Mr Chris
Lewis, Clive
Lewis, Mr Ivan
Linden, David
Lloyd, Stephen
Lloyd, Tony
Long Bailey, Rebecca
Lucas, Caroline
Lucas, Ian C.
Madders, Justin
Mahmood, Mr Khalid
Mahmood, Shabana
Malhotra, Seema
Marsden, Gordon
Martin, Sandy
Maskell, Rachael
McCabe, Steve
McCarthy, Kerry
McDonagh, Siobhan
McDonald, Andy
McDonald, Stewart Malcolm
McDonald, Stuart C.
McFadden, rh Mr Pat
McGinn, Conor
McGovern, Alison
Mclnnes, Liz
McKinnell, Catherine
McMahon, Jim
McMorin, Anna
Mearns, Ian
Miliband, rh Edward
Moon, Mrs Madeleine
Moran, Layla
Morgan, Stephen
Morris, Grahame
Murray, Ian
Nandy, Lisa
Newlands, Gavin
Norris, Alex
O’Hara, Brendan
Onasanya, Fiona
Onn, Melanie
Owurah, Chi
Osamar, Kate
Owen, Albert
Peacock, Stephanie
Pearce, Teresa
Pennycook, Matthew
Perkins, Toby
Phillips, Jess
Phillipson, Bridget
Platt, Jo
Pollard, Luke
Pound, Stephen
Powell, Lucy
Raynham, Angela
Reed, Mr Steve
Rees, Christina
Reeves, Ellie
Reeves, Rachel
Reynolds, Emma
Reynolds, Jonathan
Rimmer, Ms Marie
Rodd, Matt
Rowley, Danielle
Ruane, Chris
Russell-Moyle, Lloyd
Ryan, rh Joan
Saville Roberts, Liz
Shah, Naz
Sharma, Mr Virendra
Sheppard, Tommy
Sherriff, Paula
Shuker, Mr Gavin
Siddiq, Tulip
Skinner, Mr Dennis
Slaughter, Andy
Smeeth, Ruth
Smith, Angela
Smith, Eleanor
Smith, Jeff
Smith, Laura
Smith, Nick
Smith, Owen
Smyth, Karin
Snell, Gareth
Sobel, Alex
Spellar, rh John
Starmer, rh Keir
Stephens, Chris
Stevens, Joe
Stone, Jamie
Adams, Nigel
Afzali, Bim
Afryie, Adam
Aldous, Peter
Allan, Lucy
Allen, Heidi
Amess, Sir David
Andrew, Stuart
Argar, Edward
Atkins, Victoria
Badenoch, Mrs Kemi
Baker, Mr Steve
Baldwin, Harriett
Barclay, Stephen
Baron, Mr John
Bellingham, Sir Henry
Benyon, rh Richard
Beresford, Sir Paul
Berry, Jake
Blackman, Bob
Blunt, Crispin
Boles, Nick
Bone, Mr Peter
Bottomley, Sir Peter
Bowie, Andrew
Bradley, Ben
Bradley, rh Karen
Brady, Sir Graham
Braverman, Suella
Breerton, Jack
Bridge, Andrew
Brine, Steve
Branaksie, rh James
Bruce, Fiona
Buckland, Robert
Streeting, Wes
Stringer, Graham
Sweeney, Mr Paul
Tami, Mark
Thewliis, Alison
Thomas, Gareth
Thomas-Symonds, Nick
Thomberry, rh Emily
Timms, rh Stephen
Trickett, Jon
Turley, Anna
Turner, Karl
Twigg, Stephen
Twist, Liz
Umunna, Chuka
Vaz, Valerie
Walker, Thelma
Watson, Tom
West, Catherine
Whitehead, Dr Alan
Whitfield, Martin
Whitford, Dr Philippa
Williams, Hywel
Williams, Dr Paul
Williamson, Chris
Wilson, Phil
Wishart, Pete
Woodcock, John
Yasin, Mohammad
Zeichner, Daniel

Tellers for the Ayes:
Thangam Debbonaire and Colleen Fletcher

NOES

Burghart, Alex
Burns, Conor
Burt, rh Alistair
Cairns, rh Alun
Cartledge, James
Cash, Sir William
Chalk, Alex
Chishi, Rehman
Chope, Sir Christopher
Churchill, Jo
Clark, rh Greg
Clarke, rh Mr Kenneth
Clarke, Mr Simon
Cleaver, James
Clifton-Brown, Sir Geoffrey
Coffey, Dr Thérèse
Collins, Damian
Costa, Alberto
Courts, Robert
Cox, rh Mr Geoffrey
Crabb, rh Stephen
Crouch, Tracey
Davies, Chris
Davies, David T. C.
Davies, Glynn
Davies, Mims
Davies, Philip
Davies, rh Mr David
Dinnenage, Caroline
Djanogly, Mr Jonathan
Docherty, Leo
Dodds, rh Nigel
Donaldson, rh Sir Jeffrey M.
Donelan, Michelle
Dorries, Ms Nadine
Question accordingly negatived.

Gordon Marsden (Blackpool South) (Lab): On a point of order, Mr Speaker. I gave notice of this point of order to your office this afternoon. It relates to three questions that I tabled on Thursday last week pertaining to the trial and sentencing in Preston Crown court of three fracking protesters who have been released by the Court of Appeal without custodial sentences today.

In those questions to the Attorney General, I asked about an investigation into compliance with the judicial code of conduct in relation to the judge’s conduct in that case. Those questions were transferred by the Attorney General’s Office to the Ministry of Justice without any explanation. This lunchtime, the Court of Appeal quashed the custodial sentences. The response that I got from the Under-Secretary of State for Justice, the hon. and learned Member for South East Cambridgeshire (Lucy Frazer), was along the lines that no Minister should comment on these areas. However, on looking at the list of ministerial responsibilities, it is quite clear that questions about public interest functions, including the reference of sentences to the Court of Appeal, are valid for the...
Attorney General. On top of that, the judicial code of conduct, which the Attorney General can look at, talks particularly about family connections.

I seek your guidance Mr Speaker, on the basis on which the Attorney General transferred those questions to the Under-Secretary of State for Justice. She said in her response:

"It would not be appropriate for me or any other government minister to comment on cases which are, or have been, before the courts", but that was not the question that I asked. Incidentally, the gentleman who signed off the judicial guidance in the code of conduct is the Lord Chief Justice himself, who today said that the sentences passed by the judge at Preston Crown court were "manifestly excessive".

Mr Speaker: I am extremely grateful to the hon. Gentleman for his point of order, of which I had not myself received notice, but about the absence of which notice transmitted directly to me I make no complaint. I absolutely accept that he informed my office of this matter, but it may have been when I was elsewhere.

What do I have to say to the hon. Gentleman and for the wider benefit of the House? First, the transferability of questions from one Department to another is exclusively the preserve of the Government. That is not something in relation to which, however infuriating to an individual Member, an explanation is required to the Chair or even the Attorney General. It sounds as though some attempted explanation was given, but it has not satisfied the hon. Gentleman. It is, however, a power of a Department to shift an answer to another Department.

Secondly, by implication, the hon. Gentleman asks what recourse he has. The answer is that he can table further questions in an orderly manner, with the assistance of the Table Office, to press his case. That is the concept of what I call "persist, persist, persist," which is not an entirely novel phenomenon in the House of Commons and with which the hon. Gentleman, from long experience and perspicacity, is well familiar.

Thirdly, although the hon. Gentleman cannot insist on the presence of a particular Minister—for example, to answer an urgent question, although I am not suggesting this would be such a case—if he thinks that it is relevant to the Attorney General, rather than to the Ministry of Justice, he can seek to raise this matter at questions to the Attorney General. The question whether he is then called to ask a question would of course fall to me, and he might find that he is successful. He must find out when there will next be questions to the Attorney General, and he should table a question. If he is fortunate in the ballot, he will be on to a very good thing. If he is not successful in the ballot, he should cast his hearty eye over the successful questions and decide how he can relate his inquiry to one of the successful questions. He then leaps from his feet and hopes to catch my eye—

Chris Bryant (Rhondda) (Lab): From his feet!

Mr Speaker: He leaps to his feet. I was not suggesting that he leaps from his feet, but that he leaps to his feet. I am always grateful for what might be called the prepositional advice of the hon. Member for Rhondda. [Interruption.] Well, the hon. Member for Blackpool South (Gordon Marsden) asked for my advice, and I have given him a very detailed toolkit. The toolkit is available to him, and I hope he will use it.

Sir Mike Penning (Hemel Hempstead) (Con): Please let me have further and better particulars, and that will be soon.

Mr Paul Sweeney (Glasgow North East) (Lab/Co-op): Sir Mike Penning: On a point of order, Mr Speaker. I am leaping to my feet on behalf of colleagues from around the House and their constituents. There is a fine balance between the security of this place—making sure that the staff and everybody who visits this place are safe—and making it as open as possible for visitors so that the public can see this place. With that in mind, the security particularly at the Cromwell Road visitors entrance has been brought to my attention by my constituents and, on investigation, by others. Last night, a constituent of mine waited in the rain for an hour and a half to get into this place for a two-hour event on the Terrace for which they had been charged an awful lot of money, and they only had half an hour at the event. On investigation by myself, I can say this has been happening a lot. It is not just about one night; it is happening a lot.

Mr Speaker: I know that you will say to me, "Investigate with the Serjeant at Arms." I have done that—I spoke to him at the side of his chair—and I know this needs to be investigated, and he cannot give me an answer now. However, we want this place to be open to the public, and we do not want people to feel that they are being ripped off if they are paying for rooms, which are now very expensive. I seek your advice about how I can raise this issue and have it investigated.

Mr Speaker: The right hon. Gentleman has raised the issue, and I can understand and empathise with the enormous frustration, not to say irritation, that he and doubtless his constituent feel. His constituent probably feels genuinely let down in this situation, and I will speak to the Parliamentary Security Director about it. As the right hon. Gentleman says, there is a balance, and he speaks with a very considerable personal knowledge and experience of these matters, both from his past career and from his time serving as a Minister. I will discuss it with the Parliamentary Security Director, and I will come back to the right hon. Gentleman as quickly as I can.

On the big picture issue, nobody should have to wait an hour and a half to get into this place, and if that has happened an apology is due, and it should not continue to happen. As colleagues will know, I do not have operational control in this place. I do my best to promote good policy, but I do not have operational control. If this happens, it should not do so: it is not an acceptable state of affairs. I will try to get a satisfactory response for the right hon. Gentleman. I will come back to him when I have further and better particulars, and that will be soon.

Andrew Selous (South West Bedfordshire) (Con): Further to that point of order, Mr Speaker. This is quite a long-standing problem. On Tuesday and Wednesday mornings, visitors regularly wait for an hour or more at the Portcullis House entrance—often elderly visitors, in the heat. My right hon. Friend the Member for Hemel
Hemel Hempstead (Sir Mike Penning) is absolutely right that need to address the issue. The way we are treating visitors to this place is unacceptable.

Mr Speaker: I thank the hon. Gentleman for what he has said. I do not know for certain whether there are capacity constraints, but if there are, to put it in simple terms, insufficient people available to do the screening and a greater resource is required, I am very happy to see a greater resource. I think the track record shows that I have been very happy to see increases in expenditure in the House. We take note of Government spending but are not obliged to mirror Government spending—the House can spend money as the House thinks fit, within its estimate, and seek a revised estimate if necessary. This must not be driven by resources; the priority is to do what is right by the public and to find the resource to ensure that we can do that. I hope that the hon. Gentleman will understand—he is a very reasonable person—that I cannot give a fuller answer than that now, but I will take both points away. I hope that both he and the right hon. Member for Hemel Hempstead (Sir Mike Penning) will feel that they have been heard and understood.

Mr Sweeney: On a point of order, Mr Speaker. I seek your advice on a concern that arose in the preceding debate. Whereas in my constituency when the full roll-out happens the number of people on universal credit will rise from 1,000 to 15,515, other Members hinted that in their constituencies that number would rise only to something like 5,000, so clearly massive differentials in casework will emerge. As Chair of the Speaker’s Committee for the Independent Parliamentary Standards Authority, could you indicate what the House could do to ensure that Members and their staff are adequately resourced to deal with that differential in casework, which will be significantly stressful, as full migration happens?

Mr Speaker: The hon. Gentleman has made an important point of some power. It warrants a better response than I am confident I can give off the top of my head. If I may say so to the hon. Gentleman, I will reflect on his point and come back to him.

Chris Stephens (Glasgow South West) (SNP): Further to that point of order, Mr Speaker. The Minister for Employment very kindly offered his services to every single Member of Parliament, to pick up their universal credit cases, which I guess would be a considerable number. Could you advise on not only the pressures faced by constituency staff, but how we can seek a statement on the pressures faced by the already beleaguered staff in the Department for Work and Pensions who are dealing with universal credit?

Mr Speaker: I was not here at the time, so I did not hear that exchange. The Minister was obviously in a very generous mood and wanted to offer satisfaction. As for how that is resourced, it is a matter for the Department. I can take some responsibility for the resourcing of the House of Commons—and I do take some responsibility for that, including by supporting and initiating projects, either capital or revenue-based, that have cost considerable sums of money—but although the hon. Gentleman is keen to invest me with additional powers, I am afraid that my powers do not extend to increasing or reducing the budget of the Department for Work and Pensions. That is well beyond the ambition and scope of Mr Speaker. The hon. Gentleman’s point has been heard. I think that to some extent he is drawing on his experience not only as a Member of Parliament, but as a trade union negotiator. I do not think that a trade union negotiation can be entirely conducted across the Floor of the House, and certainly not via the Speaker.

Chris Bryant: On a point of order, Mr Speaker. I do not know whether you have been to Portcullis House recently, but there is a new exhibition on various medals that have been held by a Member of Parliament, a former Member of Parliament and a couple of brave people who were Officers of the House during the second world war. The exhibition makes reference to Sir Arnold Wilson, the then Member for Hitchin, who died in the second world war. To be fair to him, he was brave: he fought in the RAF and he was killed in action against the Germans. However, throughout the 1930s, he was a very pronounced fascist. He regularly spoke in this Chamber in favour of Mussolini and he did intelligence work for the Nazi party of Germany. I personally think that if we are going to show his medals, we should show the full story of how he came to fight in the war, rather than try to obscure his fascist past. Would it not be more appropriate for us to do so? If we want to learn our history properly, we can only do so if we learn all of it, not just parts of it.

Mr Speaker: I do not object to anything the hon. Gentleman has just said. That is news to me, but then I have learnt a lot of things for the first time from him, so this is a continuation of a long-established pattern. I have read his books. I am not sure that they are bestsellers, but I did feel, after reading his two-volume book on the history of Parliament, that I was not only entertained but better educated and an improved person as a result. I would be quite happy for the fuller story to be told. If he wants to pen a suitably brief and succinct encapsulation along the lines of what he has just said to me, there is no reason why it should not be added to the exhibition. On a serious note, I am in favour of transparency. If we are to report the record of a particular person in a laudatory sense, but in a way that perhaps distorts part of the picture or omits important detail, let us include important detail. The hon. Gentleman has sitting near him an illustrious historian, so between them they ought to be able to come up with a succinct version that tells the full story.
Social Care Funding

[Relevant documents: First Joint Report of the Health and Social Care and Housing, Communities and Local Government Committees, Long term funding of adult social care, HC 768; Eighth Report of the Communities and Local Government Committee, Session 2016-17; Adult social care: a pre-Budget report HC 47; and Ninth Report of the Communities and Local Government Committee, Session 2016-17; Adult social care; HC 1103.]

5.22 pm

Barbara Keeley (Worsley and Eccles South) (Lab): I beg to move,

That this House notes that eight years of Government cuts to council budgets have resulted in a social care funding crisis; further notes that 1.4 million older people have unmet social care needs; notes that Government grant funding for local services is set to be cut by a further £1.3 billion in 2019-20, further exacerbating the crisis; recognises with concern the increasing funding gap for social care; further recognises that proposals from the Government to invest £240 million will not close that gap; and calls on the Government to close the funding gap for social care this year and for the rest of the Parliament.

In October 2016, the Prime Minister told this House that her Government would provide a long-term sustainable system for social care that gives people reassurance. Then the Conservative manifesto said:

“Where others have failed to lead, we will act.”

But the Government have failed utterly to act and people in need of care have paid the price of that inaction. It is approaching a year since the Government promised they would deliver a Green Paper, yet it is still nowhere to be seen months after the planned publication date originally scheduled for summer. Since then, we have seen a further £1 billion cut from social care because of the cuts the Government have made to the budgets of the councils that deliver it, with disastrous consequences for the social care system.

The Prime Minister has not heeded her own warnings about failing to act. During last year’s election campaign, she said that

“the social care system will collapse unless we do something about it. We could try and pretend the problem isn’t there and hope it will go away, but it won’t. It will grow each year.”

That is exactly what has happened. The problem has not gone away and it has grown in the past year.

Debbie Abrahams (Oldham East and Saddleworth) (Lab): Does my hon. Friend agree that in addition to the immediate injection of £2.5 billion funding for social care, with 20% of the poorest local authority areas losing nearly £280 million in the past year compared with 20% of the most affluent local authorities gaining £55 million, we also need to address the issue in relation to the deprivation grant funding allocation?

Barbara Keeley: We do need to address that. Things have come to a pretty serious pass.

Mr Jim Cunningham (Coventry South) (Lab): Following on from that point, one issue I have raised on a number of occasions in this House is the lack of local authority funding for social workers. We end up with a situation where people cannot be released from hospital—we used to call it bed-blocking. Does my hon. Friend agree that this is causing major problems both for local authorities and the patients concerned?

Layla Moran (Oxford West and Abingdon) (LD): I am not sure whether the hon. Lady knows that in Oxford this is now starting to affect the local NHS. The John Radcliffe Hospital had to suspend non-urgent operations on two separate occasions in March because 170 beds were being bed-blocked. Does she not agree that it is time to see the promised Green Paper on social care, before this winter?

Barbara Keeley: Indeed. My hon. Friend makes a really good point. I noticed that the number of delayed transfers of care due to care packages has started to rise, even though it is not fully winter—[Interruption.]

Barbara Keeley: Yes, they have, over the last couple of months. The Care Quality Commission has said that in some parts of the country the social care system has now reached the tipping point that of warned of two years ago.

The response from the Secretary of State was to announce that £240 million would be given to councils to deliver packages of home care to people this winter. That is nowhere near what is needed. The social care funding gap is already over £1 billion this year and, as my hon. Friend the Member for Oldham East and Saddleworth (Debbie Abrahams) said, it will reach £2.5 billion by 2020 unless the Government intervene.

By my calculations, the Government’s offer will provide only three months’ of care packages for 70,000 people, so when the Secretary of State gets to his feet, will he tell us what will happen to people who need publicly funded home care when the money runs out? What plans do the Government have to provide care beyond the winter?

Mrs Madeleine Moon (Bridgend) (Lab): For some people, it is not possible to wait for money to be available. A third of people who are diagnosed with motor neurone disease will die within one year and over half will die within two years. A delay of a matter of weeks can alter someone’s pathway towards death. Does my hon. Friend agree that there is no time to delay?

Barbara Keeley: I very much agree. In recent months, I have met carers of people with MND and one becomes aware of how much time pressures on them.

Our motion deals with social care funding, but this debate is really about people, such as the people my hon. Friend just referred to. It is about how society treats older and younger adults, how we should enable them to live independently and with dignity, and how this Government are badly letting them down. I will look today at the damage caused by Government inaction—damage to vulnerable people who rely on social care to live with dignity, damage to the lives of unpaid family carers who have had to step in to care for their friends and relatives, and damage to 1.4 million hard-working care staff, many of whom are so badly paid and so overworked that they cannot deliver the care that people need.

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Barbara Keeley: Indeed. As I said, it is now coming up to a year since that was promised and it is about time that we started to see some plans. However, we have to bear in mind that a Green Paper is only the first stage of change—and a very early stage at that, really.

I want to pay tribute to the care staff I just mentioned. There has been a lot of talk recently about low-paid staff and how they will fare in terms of migration policies.
Being low-paid does not mean that caring roles are low-skilled. Caring staff are highly skilled. They are a credit to this country, and without their dedication the problems facing social care would be immeasurably worse. Unfortunately, their efforts cannot paper over the cracks that have emerged because of this Government’s hammer blows to council budgets. I will come on to talk about the impacts that social care cuts have on people.

James Cartlidge (South Suffolk) (Con): The hon. Lady talked about the Green Paper and how we will fund this in the long term. Obviously, we all have to contribute to that. I was interested that in the last debate she said her party was looking at such things as a wealth tax. I wonder whether she has developed her thoughts on how we should pay for this and whether it will be considering a wealth tax.

Barbara Keeley: We have indeed been doing more work on this, but we laid out in our manifesto—the hon. Gentleman’s party did not—what our future plans for social care funding were. We said what the three options for funding social care were and that it would either be one of those three options, or perhaps a combination of all three—I think that the party that is being left behind here is his.

The impact of social care cuts means that less care is now available for older and younger adults alike. Four hundred thousand fewer older people got publicly funded care in 2015 than in 2010, and 1.4 million older people now have unmet social care needs. Put simply, that is over 1 million people who are not getting help with washing, dressing, going to the toilet, making meals or taking medication.

Kevin Hollinrake (Thirsk and Malton) (Con): The hon. Lady mentions the plans in the Labour party’s manifesto, but since then the Health Committee and the Communities and Local Government Committee have produced a joint report on the future funding of adult social care that unanimously recommends adoption of the German-style social insurance system. Will Labour consider those recommendations? Is she minded to support that cross-party recommendation?

Barbara Keeley: The hon. Gentleman asked me the same question six months ago, on our last Opposition day debate on this subject, and I will give him the answer I gave him then: he should really be trying to influence his own party. I thank those Committees for the work they did, as the Prime Minister did today. Labour has got as far as producing a White Paper—not a Green Paper. We have a 2010 White Paper, and I have a copy with me. I recommend that Conservative Members who keep asking about this look at the extensive proposals in that White Paper, which followed a Green Paper and an extensive consultation. The party being left behind is the Conservative party.

The Secretary of State for Health and Social Care (Matt Hancock): For the information of the House, will the hon. Lady answer the question from my hon. Friend the Member for Thirsk and Malton (Kevin Hollinrake)? Does she support the measures recommended by the Select Committees—yes or no?

Barbara Keeley: It is really up to the Secretary of State, whose party has not produced any proposals, to answer that. On the point about cross-party working, it is the Conservative party that has no proposals. The only proposals it has come out with are the damaging ones that have now been abandoned.

Melanie Onn (Great Grimsby) (Lab): My hon. Friend is doing a very good job of reminding the Government that they are the ones in power and the ones with the decision-making powers. If they support the Select Committees’ report, they should bring forward their Green Paper and adopt them all in full. They have the opportunity to do that.

I want to ask my hon. Friend about unmet need and the growing gap between social care funding and continuing healthcare funding. I am increasingly seeing severely disabled individuals in my constituency with very high levels of need being bounced from pillar to post between continuing healthcare funding and social care funding, neither of which is meeting their needs. What does she suggest the Government do to bridge that gap?

Barbara Keeley: I suggest that the Government start with the cash injection that our social care system needs. The Labour party promised a £1 billion injection upfront to ease us out of the crisis and £8 billion across this Parliament. I suggest that that would be a starting point and that the Conservative party then tell us how it will fund social care in future.

Several hon. Members rose—

Barbara Keeley: No, I will not give way; we have very limited time.

As my hon. Friend the Member for Great Grimsby (Melanie Onn) just said, the effects of reduced access to care are very keenly felt, especially by older people, but I want to highlight what happens to young adults with learning disabilities and autism when there is too little funding to support them in the community. A recent BBC “File on 4” programme on transforming care highlighted the impact on young people with autism or a learning disability of being kept in assessment and treatment units for long periods.

The nature of these settings is chilling. A young woman with autism and extreme anxiety called Bethany, aged 17, is being kept in seclusion in St Andrew’s Hospital, Northamptonshire, in a cell-like room and fed through a hatch in a metal door, at which even her father must kneel to speak with her when he visits. She is being detained and held in seclusion despite an assessment that the current hospital setting cannot meet her needs. I want to ask my hon. Friend the Member for Great Grimsby about unmet need and the growing gap between social care funding and continuing healthcare funding. A recent BBC “File on 4” programme on transforming care highlighted the impact on young people with autism or a learning disability of being kept in assessment and treatment units for long periods.

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It is hard to imagine someone making a similar comment about the cost of treatment for a young person with cancer.

Bethany’s case highlights a growing problem which is part of the crisis in adult social care. Underfunding social care places people with a learning disability or autism at risk of being left for long periods in institutional care settings. Now that I have raised this case, the Secretary of State must look at the state of funding, which leads to perverse incentives for private hospitals like St Andrew’s to charge the NHS for keeping vulnerable young people with autism or learning disabilities in expensive and unsuitable placements because the local council does not have the resources to fund a community placement.

The journalist Ian Birrell recently wrote about Bethany’s being kept in those appalling conditions, in seclusion in a tiny cell. He asked, “Have we moved far from Bedlam?” The answer is, I am afraid, that we have not. The transforming care programme is making hardly any progress. The most recent data, published in May this year, show that 2,400 people—people like Bethany, with a learning disability or autism—are still in in-patient units, and that is an increase from an earlier figure. Many people in such units are subject to over-medication, inappropriate restraint and seclusion. They can be far from home, and they can be kept there for a very long time. The average stay is more than five years.

As the National Audit Office found, such placements are extremely expensive. In 2012-13, the NHS spent £557 million on people with a learning disability in mental health hospitals. Will the Secretary of State tell us why the Government are still funding the institutionalisation of so many people with learning disabilities, or autism, at great cost, seven years after the scandal of Winterbourne View, after which they promised to cut those placements by half?

Dr Sarah Wollaston (Totnes) (Con): The very troubling case that the hon. Lady has described illustrates why we, as a House, must get this right. Does she accept that there has been political failure to resolve the issue of how we fund social care, and will she commit herself to taking a constructive, cross-party approach to getting it right?

Barbara Keeley: The hon. Lady has asked me that question a number of times, and I always find it difficult to answer. She will know that my party really tried, but when we produced that White Paper in 2010—when we had a way forward and a set of funding proposals—all that we heard was “death tax”. In last year’s Budget, the Chancellor raised the issue of the “death tax” again: he said that it was not an option. I wonder how the hon. Lady feels about that. Labour Members can talk to a party whose Chancellor has ruled out one of the options right at the start, before anyone sits down and discusses anything. I think that that is impossible. I value the hon. Lady’s role as Chair of the Health Committee, of which I used to be a member. Perhaps she will write to the Chancellor, and ask him to stop doing that.

Dr Wollaston: As the hon. Lady will know, this is a pattern that has pinged backwards and forwards with successive Administrations. I repeat that we must get it right. We cannot continue these cycles of political failure. We will only solve the problem—particularly in a hung Parliament—with a constructive, cross-party approach.

Barbara Keeley: I am constantly astonished when Conservative Members talk about a cross-party approach. It is up to their party to come up with some proposals. When it has some proposals, there will be something to talk about. All that we have seen the Conservatives do is to abandon all the proposals that they have previously had. We legislated, in the Care Act 2014, for a cap on care costs and a lifting of the ceiling—the asset threshold—but the Conservatives have abandoned that now. They had a set of policies at the time of the election last year, but they have abandoned that. The hon. Lady needs to speak to her own Secretary of State, and I hope that she can have a constructive conversation with the Chancellor as well.

The Government’s cuts have not just reduced access to care in the ways that I have outlined; they have reduced care quality. Cuts mean that there is less good-quality care, which causes great indignity to both older and younger adults. The Care Quality Commission tells us that one in five care services—about 4,000 facilities—requires improvement or is inadequate. In too many care facilities quality is hanging by a thread largely because of the good will and dedication of care staff, but there are times when even their efforts cannot prevent standards falling. In a recent case in Tameside a care home rated inadequate was eventually forced to close for financial reasons. Care home staff were not only not being paid themselves, but they had paid out £5,000 for the food for care home residents, and an agency was owed £37,000 to pay care staff. An earlier CQC report had noted that that care provider had been made bankrupt. During the time before this home was closed, care quality was scandalously low. In 2017 the CQC found that one resident had been left in bed for five months without a bath or shower. It beggars belief that the Government think that care home managers in such situations should be given responsibility in the process for assessing a cared-for person’s mental capacity under the proposed mental capacity legislation currently in the other place, but that is what the Bill currently says—even care home managers in that failing home would be given a part in the process of assessing mental capacity—and it seems that the Government will not shift from that. I join others in the other place and urge the Secretary of State to pause the passage of the Mental Capacity (Amendment) Bill and listen to the concerns being raised about his proposals, because that is not a role that should be dumped on care home managers in the way the Bill is trying to do.

Thelma Walker (Colne Valley) (Lab): The Kirklees Solidarity Economy Network in my constituency is working to establish a community-based care co-operative. The model it is developing seeks to demonstrate that a better way is possible by putting people before profit, valuing, rewarding and respecting care workers, and ensuring that the people receiving care and the workers providing that care have a real say in how the service is run. Does my hon. Friend agree that we could all look to that model in the future?

Barbara Keeley: I very much do and thank my hon. Friend for making that point. There is a great place for co-operatives and mutuals and other such organisations. Organisations like Shared Lives are producing outstanding care in some parts of the country, and we must look at all those models.
I want to talk about hard-pressed family carers, because the situation of less care and lower quality care means that family carers are under pressure as never before to step in and provide care. The strain of caring has seen almost three quarters of carers suffer mental ill health and nearly two thirds suffer physical health problems, according to Carers UK. But too few carers can access respite from caring; they are at breaking point.

Problems with poor care quality and a lack of support were highlighted earlier this year in a report by Age UK entitled, “Why call it care when nobody cares?” At the launch of that report, both I and the Care Minister heard from carers like Joyce. At 73, Joyce cares full-time for her husband David who has had a stroke and a massive brain haemorrhage. Joyce has to do everything for David to make sure he is “clean and comfortable at all times”. That involves regularly lifting him in and out of his bed or chair to wash him, or take him to the toilet, throughout the day and night. She said:

“It is extremely hard to get good respite care where we live in Cheshire. Our local care home is no longer an option due to being cut as a provider by the local council. I had to fight tooth and nail for the care David currently gets in a day centre—but it just isn’t enough.

I don’t know how I’ll continue to cope without more support and regular respite breaks. Our care was cut in March, the third time that we have had respite care pulled. I am so angry and frustrated. I am so worried at what is facing us at the moment I hardly dare think about it.”

What carers like Joyce need is comprehensive support and carers breaks to allow them to look after themselves as well as the person they care for. What they have received from the Government is the damp squib of a “carers action plan” in place of a proper national strategy.

Labour has already pledged to deliver a national carers strategy as we did with our second national strategy in 2009. That national carers strategy pledged £150 million of funding for respite care breaks for carers. That funding has now disappeared into a black hole in the better care fund, leaving carers like Joyce to fight “tooth and nail” to get any respite at all.

Kevin Hollinrake rose—

Barbara Keeley: I must make progress.

For care staff, the combination of cuts to social care funding and increasing demand for care has created the perfect storm of pressures, affecting the quality of care. Care staff themselves are reporting seeing a major decline in standards of care over the past couple of years.

Kim, one member of care staff, told her trade union, Unison, that she “found it increasingly difficult to provide a good standard of care because of staff shortages and the greater need of clients. Often visits to clients have to be rushed, making medication mistakes by staff more commonplace and no social time for clients.”

Another care home staff member from Lancashire said that “a lot of the time it feels like we are operating a ‘people warehouse’ and just offering the basics of feeding and personal care.”

I find those comments deeply troubling. They show the direct human impact that the underfunding of social care is having. Staff are rushing from one appointment to another, with no time to talk. They are being seen as “heartless robots as opposed to a lifeline service”.

That is how one care home staff member described her job. Care staff are some of the most dedicated and highly skilled workers in this country, but these pressures, added to their pitifully low pay and their poor terms and conditions, are driving people from a sector where they have never been needed as much as they are now.

The care sector is teetering on the edge of a cliff. Without an urgent response from the Government, it could topple altogether. Ministers in this place talk glibly about making hard choices, but the truth is that this Government have chosen to pursue austerity on the backs of older people and vulnerable adults, who rely on social care. If austerity is now over, as the Prime Minister has claimed, the Government must put in the funding that social care needs to bring it back from the brink.

At last year’s election, Labour outlined a plan to invest an additional £8 billion in the social care system. We want to lift the quality of care and to lift access to care and support for carers before moving on to build our new national care service, as outlined in our White Paper. The Prime Minister said last year that the Government would act. They must now commit to a sustainable long-term funding plan. I urge hon. Members to vote for our motion tonight, to ensure that the Government honour the Prime Minister’s promise, because the people who need care, their family carers, and the care staff who care for them deserve better than this.

5.46 pm

The Secretary of State for Health and Social Care

(Matt Hancock): Each and every one of us in this House recognises and values those who care, from care workers to nurses to the millions of unpaid carers who look after loved ones. I think the whole House can unite behind the statement that how we care for the most vulnerable is a mark of our civility as a society. Across our country, in our NHS and in our care homes, so many people dedicate their lives to caring for others. I want to address the pressures we face in our social care system in the short term, as well as the long-term reforms we must take to ensure that our social care system is sustainable and fit for the future.

Right at the start, I want to address the individual case of Bethany, which the hon. Member for Worsley and Eccles South (Barbara Keeley) rightly raised. On seeing the reports of the case in the media, I immediately asked for an investigation inside the Department, along with NHS England and the Care Quality Commission. This is clearly a distressing case—it was initially brought to my attention by Ian Birrell—and we will get to the bottom of it. More broadly, the number of in-patients is now down to 2,375, a fall of 17% from March 2015, including 600 who had previously been in hospital for five years or more. So there has been some progress, but there is clearly more to do and the hon. Lady was right to raise the issue.

Barbara Keeley: I gave the House a statistic of 2,600. Bethany’s dad, who is campaigning on her behalf, wants to see her in a proper community placement, but there are thousands of Bethanys. This is a serious matter. We had a debate here on transforming care a few months ago, but very little has happened since.

Matt Hancock: As I said, progress has been made. There has been a reduction of 17% in the number of in-patients—down from 2,875 in March 2015 to 2,375.
on the latest figures—but I would fully acknowledge that there is more to do and I am determined to see that happen.

Our population is ageing. More people are living longer, and, as a society, we must address the challenge that that creates for social care. To put that into context, over the next 25 years, the number of people aged 75 and over is set to double and the number of people aged 85 will rise by more still. Of course, this is good news. It is down in part to the hard work of our NHS. Cancer survival rates are at a record high and strokes are down by a third, but with such successes come new challenges. For instance, we are seeing a rise in dementia and in age-related conditions, with 70% of people in residential care homes now suffering with dementia.

Debbie Abrahams: Will the Secretary of State agree to support a dedicated dementia fund, as proposed by the Alzheimer’s Society, to recognise the inequity given the additional care costs that such people would be paying?

Matt Hancock: I have seen that proposal from the Alzheimer’s Society and we are looking at it now. At the same time, we are working on both the Green Paper for Alzheimer’s and we are looking at it now. At the Select Committee’s proposals. The concept is that, if no one has to lose everything, and that is not only everyone who can afford it pays something, that means that there is more to do and I am determined to see that happen.

Andrew Selous (South West Bedfordshire) (Con): Does the Secretary of State accept that there is actually a lot of support on the Government Benches, the Opposition Benches and, indeed, across the country for the Joint Select Committee’s proposals. The concept is that, if everyone who can afford it pays something, that means that no one has to lose everything, and that is not only worth while, but urgent.

Matt Hancock: I will come on to the proposed funding reforms. My hon. Friend is right that there is support for reform across the House, but there is support for different types of reform in different parts of the House. I respect the shadow Opposition spokeswoman, but it would help if she could bring more clarity to the Opposition’s position, updating the proposal that they put forward in 2010, which I will come on to in some detail. That will help if they want to genuinely contribute to this debate.

Of course, social care is not only a challenge of old age. The number of people of working age with care needs is also growing. Many of us in this House will know the pain and difficulty of helping a loved one who needs constant care or faces dementia. Such pressures bring long-term challenges, and we must ensure that both the NHS and our social care system can respond to the challenges we face.

Janet Daby (Lewisham East) (Lab): There are more nurses on our wards than in 2010, but it is important that we have more in the future, and a whole run of work is going on to ensure that we can get more nurses right across the NHS and the social care system, including community nurses. As we put £20 billion extra into the NHS, we are going to need more nurses as a result. The nursing associate route is now available in social care, and there is a policy programme to try to ensure that we answer the exact question that the hon. Lady rightly identifies.

Damian Green (Ashford) (Con): In the light of what my right hon. Friend just said about the long-term nature of the challenges, may I put to him the question that the Chair of the Health and Social Care Committee put to the Opposition spokeswoman? Does my right hon. Friend agree that the only way to get a decent long-term solution for all the people who will need social care is by doing so on a cross-party basis with a wide degree of consensus?

Matt Hancock: I pay tribute to my right hon. Friend. His work in this area. He is incredibly thoughtful and has been prepared to ask some of the difficult questions and give his answers to them. I agree that this is something that we should take forward on a cross-party basis wherever possible. I will come on to the long-term funding in a moment, but I just want to address directly the question of short-term funding.

I query the Labour party’s motion because 80% of local authority funding was reliant on the central Government grant in 2010, and that is no longer the case. Looking only at the central Government grant is an inaccurate way of assessing the question. For instance, we introduced the social care precept directly to address some of these costs. It would be far better if this debate took place in the context of the available budget for social care, which is increasing by 8% in real terms over the four years from 2015-16 to 2019-20. The debate should be based on facts rather than partial facts, and that is how I will seek to proceed.

Quality is important, too, and 83% of adult care settings are now rated good or outstanding by the CQC. The figure has risen from 79% in just the last year, and it is the highest since measurement started in 2014, but I want to see it rise further still.

The links between the social care system and the NHS are important, too. No one should stay in hospital longer than necessary.

Dr Dan Poulter (Central Suffolk and North Ipswich) (Con): My right hon. Friend is right to highlight the link between healthcare and social care. If we are to care properly for people with the long-term conditions he has outlined, we need to have a more joined up and integrated system. It is hard to deliver that when we have a taxpayer-funded NHS and a social care system in which many people now have to pay for their own care. In looking for a cross-party solution, which he is open to, will he consider that we may need to look at a taxpayer-funded solution for funding social care so that we can deliver the transformative integrated care we want for older people?

Matt Hancock: Part of the social care system is, of course, tax-payer-funded, but I also value the contributions that people make to social care. They are an important
part of keeping the system strong. We dismiss those contributions at our peril, but I agree with my hon. Friend that we need to make sure we get more funding and better integration between the healthcare and social care systems. We can do that with different funding sources, as long as we have better organisation on the ground.

We must make sure we have the appropriate amount of care available so that people can leave hospital at the right time; people should not have to stay in hospital longer than necessary, as it reduces their dignity and quality of life and leads to poorer health outcomes, as well as putting unnecessary pressure on the NHS.

Since February 2017, more than 1,900 beds have been freed up in hospitals by reducing NHS and social care delays, yet we know that the winter months bring increasing pressure on adult social care services, which can have a knock-on impact on hospitals. On top of the rising social care budget, we are providing an additional £240 million for adult social care capacity this winter, which will help councils to get patients home quicker and free up hospital beds for more urgent and acute cases.

Today I have published the allocation for every local authority in England, and the Barnett formula will apply to allocations in Scotland, Wales and Northern Ireland. Individual allocations include, for example, £1.3 million in Salford and £1.5 million in Leicester.

Julian Knight (Solihull) (Con): My constituents and my local council are thankful for the funding increase of £870,356, which will help the adult social care situation in Solihull. We have a lot of people over the age of 65, including 40% of the Silhill ward alone.

Matt Hancock: I am grateful for my hon. Friend’s work in making the case for more support for adult social care in Solihull, and to support the NHS in Solihull through that. I hope the funding we have announced today will help in Solihull, and the people of Solihull should know they have an excellent champion who has helped them to get that funding.

Rachael Maskell (York Central) (Lab/Co-op): To address delayed discharges, it is crucial that we have transitional care and extra care in place. Will the Secretary of State look at York’s proposal for building facilities on an adjacent site to make that happen?

Matt Hancock: That is an interesting proposal, and I have seen others similar to it. We are looking at the link with housing as part of the Green Paper, and I have been discussing that with the Department concerned. The point the hon. Lady raises is important. I note that £731,800 has been allocated today to improved adult social care in York, to take the pressure off the NHS in York this winter. I hope that she will acknowledge that fact.

Hugh Gaffney (Coatbridge, Chryston and Bellshill) (Lab): In Scotland, like in England, Wales and Northern Ireland, we have seen unbearable cuts to councils, which have made the problems of funding social care get worse. Does the Secretary of State agree that the Tories and the Scottish National party have to get a grip of the situation and give the councils more resources? They have given out figures for the Barnett formula. What is Scotland actually getting?

Matt Hancock: Through the Barnett formula, we have made available funding for Scotland today, which in England we are spending on adult social care. I very much hope the SNP Government in Holyrood will make sure they do the right thing by this funding and ensure that it goes to helping people get out of hospital when they medically can leave hospital but need care once they get out. I think we are agreed between us that the SNP Government in Holyrood should spend this money wisely.

Melanie Onn: I am keen to learn how much extra my constituency is getting, given that the Secretary of State is doing a roll call of all that. I also wish to ask him about the comments he made about the streams of funding for social care and healthcare. Is he proposing that funding would be ring-fenced? There is a concern that when we try to integrate the two, urgent healthcare will always come before social care.

Matt Hancock: That need not necessarily be the case. It was slightly disappointing that the hon. Lady, who is normally a great champion of cross-party working, did not welcome the £780,000 extra for Grimsby, but you can’t win them all. The people of Grimsby need to know that we are there to support them and to support their local NHS.

I now turn to the long-term funding pressures. The lifetime care costs of a 65-year-old today are about £45,000 on average, but those total average costs that people face are not distributed evenly. Some people face no care costs at all, whereas the care costs for someone with dementia who lives into their 90s can run into hundreds of thousands of pounds. As a society, that is the challenge we face, yet right now there is no way to predict or insure this potential financial burden. We are committed to ensuring that everyone has access to the care and support they need. However, as has always been the case, that must be based on the principle of shared responsibility. With sensible planning, people should not have to fear the risk of losing everything. The adult social care Green Paper, which will be published later this year, will bring forward a range of ideas to address the long-term challenge. We want to learn from what has been proven to work, with one example being the auto-enrolment pension reforms, which have been taken forward on a cross-party basis over a decade. The rate of opting out has been remarkably low, and this has put in place the foundations for the strengthening of our pensions system over time. The Green Paper will propose a range of options and ideas, learning from both the UK and from around the world.

Andrew Lewer (Northampton South) (Con): The Secretary of State has said that he wants this debate to be based on fact, not partial fact, so may I have his assurance that research behind the Green Paper has taken full account of overseas options, which provide insurance models and choice, taking us well beyond these simplistic more tax solutions to address this complex problem?
Matt Hancock: Yes; I enjoyed reading that report on my summer holidays and thought the research that underpinned it was very interesting. Of course, the taxpayer does contribute to the system, but we cannot rely only on the taxpayer to support the growing cost. Some people propose the answer that the taxpayer should simply fund everything, but I do not think that that is a valid solution.

Alongside the reforms to the funding, we need to transform our care system, so we will look into how the Government can support innovation and encourage new models of care provision. That will include looking at the role of housing and how we can replicate the very best models that combine a home with quality of care. For instance, I love the examples of combing care provision for the young and the old. I pay tribute to the doctors behind the “Old People’s Home for 4 Year Olds” project, which is good viewing on Channel 4. We also need to better support people through well-designed aids and adaptations, and we must ensure better support for carers, too.

Kevin Hollinrake: The Secretary of State is making some good points, but may I press him on the point made by my hon. Friend the Member for Northampton South (Andrew Lewer) about the social insurance recommendation in the Select Committee report? The shadow Minister refused to confirm whether she would consider the findings in that report; will the Secretary of State agree at least to consider the proposals and recommendations that were delivered on a unanimous cross-party basis?

Matt Hancock: Yes, absolutely. I am considering them. In fact, I shall go further and say that I am attracted to the insurance and contribution model. There are many different potential details in how such a model can be delivered, but I am very much taking that Select Committee report into consideration as we draft the Green Paper.

Alongside ensuring that the funding is in place, we need to make sure that we support carers. In June, we published the carers action plan, a two-year package of support for carers to ensure that they are properly recognised, helped and valued in a way that supports their health and wellbeing. The Green Paper will go further and propose how society can strengthen support for carers as a vital part of a sustainable health and social care system.

The guiding principles behind the Green Paper will be sevenfold: first, improving the quality and safety of care; secondly, integrated care, with the NHS and social care systems operating as one; thirdly, giving the highest possible control to those receiving support; fourthly, better practical support for families and carers; fifthly, a sustainable funding model supported by a diverse, vibrant and stable market; sixthly, greater security for those born with care needs or who develop those needs in later life; and seventhly, a valued NHS and social care workforce. Those will be the principles behind the Green Paper, and I hope that we can build cross-party support for it.

As a society, we need to rise to the unprecedented social care challenge that our generation faces. For the sake of future generations, we must act now to build a better and more sustainable social care system, in the short term and the long term, that ensures that people are properly valued: a system both for those in need of care and for their carers, a system that supports carers—not only those who work in care homes but those who care for loved ones at home—and with the goal of building a sustainable health and social care system of which we can all be proud.

Several hon. Members rose—

Madam Deputy Speaker (Dame Rosie Winterton): Order. I wish to manage expectations in this debate. By my calculation, I estimate that when we come to Back Benchers, there will probably be less than half an hour, so I will have to impose an immediate four-minute limit. Colleagues would be very popular if they kept to less than that, because others would be able to get in. Of course, that does not apply to the Scottish National party spokesperson, whom I am about to call. If colleagues want others to get in, I urge them to take even less than four minutes.

Dr Philippa Whitford (Central Ayrshire) (SNP): Here we are discussing this issue again when we discussed it just before the summer recess. That shows not only its importance but the fact that we are not making progress. We were promised the Green Paper last year. Then it was late last year, then early this year, then autumn 2018. I gently point out that it is now autumn 2018.

The five year forward view talked about managing demand in the NHS if there was an absolute game changer of an increase in public health to try to reduce the demand at the front door of the NHS, an increase in funding and provision of social care to stop funding haemorrhaging out the back door of the NHS. Unfortunately, what we have seen over the past five years is ongoing cuts to social care. I am sure that the £240 million for the winter from the Secretary of State is very welcome, but it is not nearly enough, and we will just keep on having this debate unless we can move forward and have a serious debate around the Green Paper.

As was mentioned earlier, Age UK estimates that more than 1.2 million people are not getting the care that they require. Need has increased by almost 50% since 2010, and yet there has been a decrease of 26% in England of local authority funded places. One third of people needing care are totally dependent on their family. It is estimated that 6.8 million people—that is one in 10 of the UK population—are involved in caring for a loved one, either full-time, part-time, or topping up care. Age UK also estimates that one third—700,000 people—receive no care whatever.

Despite an almost 9% cut in their budget, the Scottish Government spend £163 per head more on health than the UK Government—the Minister might actually want to listen to that, having made snide remarks about the Scottish Government—and £157 per head more on social care. Scotland is the only country in the UK that provides free personal care, and we have sustained that since 2002. That has led to less than one third of the increase in A&E attendances and emergency admissions in Scotland over the past five years compared with England. The system is really expensive and it is challenging, but it reduces delayed discharges and it reduces emergency admissions, and the estimate is that it is still cost-effective. I suggest that the Government might want to look at that in the Green Paper.
Mr Paul Sweeney (Glasgow North East) (Lab/Co-op): In my constituency, the Barchester Alexandra Court Care Home has closed, with 53 residents losing their places. That was because Glasgow City Council’s funding has been cut by 10%, yet the discretionary spend for Scottish companies has been cut by only 5%. Surely that is a disproportionate cut in social care in Scotland. Although the objectives are laudable, we have seen continued pressure on social care in Scotland as in the rest of the UK.

Dr Whitford: There is no question but that there is pressure. There is no question but that all the systems face the pressures of increased demand, workforce and money, but if the hon. Gentleman would like us to match funding down here, then we will remove £881 million from our health budget and, obviously, that £157 a head from our care budget. We spend more per head of population in Scotland—considerably more. [Interruption.] That is one of the mantras that is always heard down here, but may I point out that, for a Barnett consequential of 9.3%, the Scottish Government have to manage one third of the UK landmass—that is roads, rail, GP practices, hospitals and schools.

Several hon. Members rose—

Dr Whitford: No, I am sorry, I will not give way. Members want to make speeches, but if they intervene on me, there will not be any.

In Scotland, we have been working for the past five years on integrating health and social care. I can say that it is an awful lot harder than the job that we did of integrating primary and secondary care. Simply because one side is tax-funded and the other involves multiple private companies and is means-tested. We are already working on that. Our integrated joint boards manage one half of our health budget along with local authority funding. It is about shifting money from hospital into primary care, mental health, community care and social care.

There are three particular groups who need social care. The frail elderly mentioned by the Secretary of State, the number of whom will escalate massively in the coming 20 years, need support and comfort, and most of them would like to be at home. The home care hours in Scotland have doubled over the past seven years, which allows people with more complex needs to be cared for at home, so as not to end up in a care home or to land acutely in hospital.

As was mentioned by the hon. Member for Bridgend (Mrs Moon), who is no longer in her place, end of life is a critical issue; it is a point at which time is of the essence. Since 2015, all Scottish local authorities have provided free personal care to people defined as having a terminal condition—facing the end of life—even when they are under 65. The Government should look into such a measure, as it provides dignity.

Working age disability accounts for a huge chunk of social care funding. These people want to be mobile and to be allowed to participate in society, and it is important that that is what they do—they are not just stuck away somewhere, as might have been the case many years ago. From April, under Frank’s law, which was named after the footballer Frank Koppel, under-65s with degenerative conditions, not just disability, will be able to receive free personal care. That includes people with early dementia and multiple sclerosis. We ask that the DWP does not then rob these families of that money by cutting other disability allowances.

I mentioned the workforce, which is an enormous challenge in the health service and one with which every local authority, integrated joint board, company and care home is struggling. Despite the workforce in Scotland increasing by 11% over the last three years, it is becoming harder to recruit. Brexit only makes that harder because a significant proportion of social care staff are from Europe.

We need to make social care a career—to be decent to carers by paying them the real living wage, not the pretend one, and by paying them for all the hours they work, even at night. It is important to treat people with dignity if we want them to treat our loved ones with dignity. Carers should have job satisfaction from having time to care. Having 15 minutes to flit in and out does not provide job satisfaction, and it does not provide satisfaction or continuity for the patient or the carer. There needs to be a career structure. Caring should be looked upon like nursing, with training, investment and a way of staying in that career. It should not just be some job that people do until they get a job on the checkout at Tesco because that pays better.

We have talked about being able to discuss the Green Paper, but unfortunately there is no sign of it. It is meant to offer an opportunity to rethink care. The Nuffield Trust suggests looking at the Japanese system or the German system, which has already been mentioned. It is noticeable that levers have been built into the Japanese system so that demand can be controlled, and that means that eligibility may well change. On the plus side, the system is Japan is a holistic one and it looks at the global wellbeing of the older population—so if we do look at these other systems, we should look at them in their entirety.

The German system is based on social insurance. Well, does that not ring a bell? We used to have national health insurance, but then the “health” was dropped. Maybe we should think about whether national insurance should really stop when people retire. Perhaps we might set a level above anyone who is living only on the state pension, because there are pensioners who are very well off and who suddenly stop paying national insurance exactly at the point when their health, care and social needs start to increase. We need to look at all these options, but it is crucial that there are no sudden changes—that we do not have a WASPI situation, whereby the goalposts suddenly move with only a couple of years’ notice, and that we do not have a measure like the one in the Conservative manifesto last year that was then labelled the dementia tax.

We need to discuss this issue as adults, to look around the world and to look at the demands ahead. Older people and people with disability across the UK need to be able to live a life of decent quality, with dignity.

6.18 pm

Alan Mak (Havant) (Con): There are just 15,000 centenarians in the UK today, but the population aged 90 and over is growing rapidly. One in six people alive today—more than 10 million—will reach triple figures and get a letter from Her Majesty the Queen. Social care is at the heart of a system that must ensure that
everyone can live a long and fulfilling life, and that is both an opportunity and a challenge. I welcome the Government’s action in this area, which is reflected by the Care Quality Commission’s conclusion in its annual state of care report that 82% of adult social care services are good or outstanding.

I commend the hard work of carers, professionals and management who work tirelessly every day to make sure that our loved ones receive the best possible care. That is certainly the case in my region. Across Hampshire, 26 of 28 care homes provided by Hampshire County Council are rated good or outstanding by the CQC. That includes, in my constituency, Malmesbury Lawn care home in Leigh Park. But we need to continue this success, and funding is an important aspect of that. I welcome the fact that the Government have given local authorities an extra £2 billion over the next three years to meet these challenges. I also welcome today’s announcement by the Secretary of State of the extra £240 million to help adult social care get through this winter. Hampshire will receive over £4.7 million, and that is extremely welcome.

However, it is clear that money is not the only issue that needs to be debated and is not the only solution to the challenge of a growing and ageing population. Only by embracing technology, as the fourth industrial revolution accelerates, can we keep more people out of care homes and in their own homes. Some local authorities are already moving forward at pace with ambitious plans to make sure that new technology plays a role in revolutionising social care. In my own region, Hampshire County Council has been at the forefront of the new wave of assistive care technology. That includes alarms worn by patients that can detect falls and epileptic fits, and even have GPS capability in case a dementia sufferer wanders from their care home. Around the county, 8,600 people benefit from supported by assistive technology.

The roll-out of such technology has saved the council about £7 million in domiciliary care and care home costs, so there is a financial benefit to it. Hampshire has also become the first authority to work with Amazon in trialling a new customised version of its Echo device to support people to live independently in their own homes, which should be one of the goals of the social care system. I commend the council’s Liz Fairhurst, the cabinet lead for this area. It is right that she has been shortlisted for the Local Government Association’s councillor achievement awards for this year. She has been a fantastic leader of adult social care services across Hampshire, and other county councils are following its lead.

The use of technology in adult social care is exciting and necessary. However, as I said in my Centre for Policy Studies paper published in May this year, we can make full use of all these technologies only if we end the culture of fax machines, pagers and paper in the NHS. Just as the NHS must go fully digital over the next 10 years, care homes, the care sector and local authorities must also be digital-first. That is the key to making sure that we can make the most of technology to help alleviate the challenges of adult social care in the years ahead. As the baby boomer generation ages, we have a new generation of tech-savvy pensioners who will be going through our care system for the first time. They will be a generation comfortable with new technology and willing to embrace digital care.

I understand that the pressures on the care system are not just financial, and that technology is not a silver bullet, but by deploying technology we can unlock savings, alleviate funding pressures, keep more residents in their homes, and deliver a better service. I hope that these aspirations will be reflected in the Secretary of State’s Green Paper when it comes out in the weeks ahead.

6.22 pm

**Liz Kendall** (Leicester West) (Lab): This year is the 70th anniversary of the NHS. It is also the 70th anniversary of our social care system, but that has received far too little attention to date. It is not getting any of the national celebrations—the birthday cakes and cards—and certainly none of the £20 billion birthday present that the NHS received from the Prime Minister.

Yet social care is more important than ever before. A quarter of older people now need help with daily living—getting up, washed, dressed and fed. More adults with physical and learning disabilities need substantial packages of support. There are 1 million paid care workers and 6.5 million unpaid carers. Yet despite the fact that this touches so many people’s lives and that there is an increasing demand, we have no sense from the Government of the reality of the situation. There has been a 10% cut in real terms in social care spending, with 400,000 fewer people getting any kind of help and support. A third of carers have to give up their job or reduce their hours to look after their loved ones, and a quarter of the paid care workforce leaves every single year. There is nothing from Government Front Benchers—no sense of the urgency of the challenge we are facing.

We cannot solve this problem without substantial extra funding. The Health Foundation says that we need £6 billion just to maintain the current inadequate system. It is not good enough.

Over the last 20 years, we have had 12 Green and White Papers and five independent commissions, but we have not solved this problem, and we need to understand why. Most people think that they are not going to end up needing this support. When they end up needing it, they do not realise that many of them will have to pay. They think the current system is unfair, but when radical proposals have been put forward for how to fund the system, they believe that those are unfair too.

This issue has been a political football. Labour was accused of imposing a death tax, and the Tories were accused of imposing a dementia tax—but it is not the politicians who suffer; it is the people who use the services and their carers. We cannot go on like this any longer.

I believe that one of the reasons this issue has not been solved is that much of it is about low-paid women who work in people’s homes and care homes invisibly. Caring is not valued, and we have to change that.

**Karin Smyth** (Bristol South) (Lab): My hon. Friend is making an excellent speech and she is an expert in this area. She is right; the language we have heard today is all about the challenges and the costs. This is an infrastructure issue, and it needs to be treated as such.

Because women lead this workforce, it is not considered an infrastructure issue, and if we did that and changed the language around this, we would have a completely different debate. Does she agree?
Liz Kendall: I absolutely agree. If a third of parents had to give up work or reduce their hours because they could not get childcare, it would be a national scandal. We need to make social care as much a part of our economic infrastructure as childcare, and we have to wake up to that.

The reality is that we face a choice: either we leave individuals to pay for care, through no fault of their own, with only the wealthy able to afford to put aside extra money—the idea that a “care ISA” will solve the huge challenge of social care is, quite frankly, ridiculous—or we pool the costs and share the risks for a fairer and more equitable and efficient system. My view is that we have to look at the contribution of wealthier older people, not just the working-age population who are already struggling with so much of the cost of daily living.

Alongside extra money, we need real reform. We have to change and improve the way we offer care and support, to give people more choice, say and control and to ensure that care is personalised and flexible around the needs of individuals and families, not just one size fits all. We have to shift the focus towards prevention, early intervention and promoting genuine wellbeing. We have to put people who use care and have lived experience at the heart of the system, in terms of both policy and delivery. That is what has to be in the Green Paper. I cannot believe we are still without it. The Government need to get a move on and take action.

6.27 pm

Mary Robinson (Chadde) (Con): It is a pleasure to follow the hon. Member for Leicester West (Liz Kendall).

Two years ago, Greater Manchester became the first region in the country to have devolved control over its health and social care services, with a significant budget of £6 billion. My constituency sits in the Stockport Council area, which is one of the 10 local authorities in the combined local authority. Greater Manchester is home to almost 3 million people, with a thriving economy and a region. There are differences even at ward level. For instance, in Bramhall South and Woodford in my constituency, men and women live 12.4 years longer than someone living only 5 miles across the borough in Brinnington and Central.

The rising number of older people across the country means that there will be a greater need for health and social care support in both the short and long term, and we have to approach this in different ways. In his speech last week, the Mayor of Greater Manchester, Andy Burnham, indicated that a unique opportunity for the region is to integrate health with everything—early years, education, community safety, housing and employment.

Successive Governments have long argued for that, and only recently are this Government the ones that are tackling it.

To provide effective support and truly implement integrated services, we must enable care to move out of hospitals and into communities, closer to where patients want to be—in their own homes or homes. The hospital transfer pathway, more colloquially named the red bag initiative, is already proving to be an effective tool in that regard, and care homes in my constituency have been chosen to pilot its effectiveness. The red bag holds standardised information about a patient’s general health and existing medical conditions. Most importantly, it clearly identifies the patient as a care home resident. This means it is possible for the patient to be discharged sooner; the care home is able to support the resident, and the knock-on effect is to ease the pressure on hospital services and to free up beds.

At this point, may I welcome the £1.28 million that will be given to Stockport Council in social care winter funding? Since the devolution settlement two years ago, Stockport has striven to create a more person-centred health and social care system. An extra £41 million is being spent on GP practices by 2021 to make it easier to see medical professionals at convenient times.

Nationally, GPs spend at least a fifth of their time on non-medical issues. In Greater Manchester, we have identified the need to address health through other means—specifically, social prescribing. It is a relatively new innovation in the health service. It is a means of enabling GPs and other frontline staff to refer people to services in their community, instead of offering only medicalised solutions. These services range from gardening to walking or arts and leisure. As a direct result of social prescribing, evidence suggests that there have been 28% fewer GP consultations and 24% fewer A&E attendances. Research also indicates that 90% of health problems are affected by the patient’s wellbeing. Social prescribing has been described as “absolutely fabulous” by one patient, who has said that “my whole perspective of life has been changed!”

Through Stockport Together’s programme, the borough has developed a collective local approach to improving health and care outcomes aligned with the overall Greater Manchester strategy. I appreciate that there is no one-size-fits-all approach to addressing social care, but by partnership working and working together, we can address this issue and deliver the social care that people want and deserve.

6.31 pm

Liz Twist (Blaydon) (Lab): Nothing brings home the reality of the problems we face in social care like the experience of our constituents. A month ago, I was contacted by the son of a constituent. His mother, who has Alzheimer’s, had a care package in place that was working well and she was being kept at home. However, she also has heart problems and, sadly, she was admitted to hospital, via A&E, some weeks ago in July. He told me that she is now well enough to leave hospital, but her care package cannot be reinstated. She certainly could not go home without support, and he was becoming increasingly frustrated at the lack of a care plan. He feared that the longer she stayed in hospital, the worse her overall health would become. He found that totally unacceptable, and I have to say I did too, and I immediately took up her case with the local authority. Officers looked into this case and found that, yes, despite the best efforts of the social work team, it had not been possible to find a provider to fulfil my constituent’s needs. Other people are also waiting for a care package, as providers cannot be found quickly. Like her son, I find this an appalling situation.

I tell this real-life story not to tug at the heartstrings, but because it reveals a few of the problems we have with the current social care system. My constituent has
high needs due to her physical and psychological conditions. She was fortunate—pre-hospital admission—to have an established care package that worked for her and helped her to live independently. We know that there are many people across England who have unmet needs. They are unmet because the funding is not there to give them the help they need and that local authorities would wish to give them. This cannot be right.

The case reveals very clearly another problem in our social care system—the fragility of the home care market in many parts of the country. What a state we are in when we cannot find people willing to provide help to those who need it; when providers are unable to run a business employing people who will do that job; and when the price local authorities are able to pay is set at too low a level to provide any service at all. I want to make it clear that I want to see our social care services directly provided by local authorities to restore such control.

The case also reveals another problem with our social care system: that of not treating our social care workforce with dignity, respect and, yes, providing them with decent pay and conditions. These staff look after the most intimate needs of our most vulnerable people, and the least we can do is give them a level of pay that recognises the skills they need. To do that, we need a plan for social care. We need more money to provide the care that people need to remain independent and to help people at an earlier stage. We know that earlier intervention works and reduces pressure on the NHS.

As we approach the Budget, I call on the Minister to ensure that local authorities have the funds they need to provide that care. An extra £240 million will not put things right—and yes, I know how much it is in Gateshead; I have looked it up. It is just another piece of string trying to hold together our pressurised social care system. I also call on the Minister to talk to local authorities and our trade unions about establishing a pay system that recognises the importance of working in social care and the skills involved. In short, we need a thoroughly thought-out and resourced national workforce strategy for social care.

Owing to time constraints, I cannot talk about residential care, but we need to resolve the sleeping situation. I am aware that there is an appeal, but those staff deserve to be considered and paid properly.

6.35 pm

Julian Knight (Solihull) (Con): It is a great pleasure to follow the hon. Member for Blydon (Liz Twist), who made a very good speech. It is a shame that we have such a short time to debate this, because it is one of the key issues of our lifetimes and will impact all of us in many different ways—it is impacting my life. I am absolutely blessed with the most wonderful in-laws, and I am saying that not just because I am having dinner with my wife in an hour, but because, frankly, they are absolutely golden people. We are dealing with issues of social care as a family, often from far away. The challenges, which are multifarious, varied and deep, affect every part of our life in ways that cannot be understood until one is in that situation.

We are part of the sandwich generation, and my town is at the frontline in that respect. We have an ageing population. I was told by a member of my staff that we have an older population than Eastbourne—I am not sure what that is supposed to imply, but we do. According to Solihull Council, by 2036 one in four of our population will be over 65 and fully 5% will be over 85.

Time and again I encounter on the doorstep what Age UK has dubbed the “silent crisis”—people quietly trying to look after elderly loved ones behind closed doors. They often do so just out of pure love and decency, and often they have care issues themselves. My experience, from knocking on some 30,000 doors across my constituency and from my family, has driven home how essential it is that Members on both sides of the House, despite dogma and party politicking, try to come to a long-term solution. We have to work together to find the bold solutions needed to put social care on a stable, sustainable footing. That is why I welcome the report from both Select Committees. Many of its recommendations make a lot of sense. It is essential that we accept that this problem cannot be met with a patch-and-mend approach, yet providers and local authorities need support to ensure that the level and quality of social care provision match need in the short and medium term. However, unless these measures are accompanied by a serious root-and-branch strategic review of how we fund and deliver social care services—one that recognises that many of the problems currently facing the sector are not down merely to insufficient funds—they will provide, at best, only a temporary reprieve.

That is the challenge we all face. We will have to debate this for many years to come, but we have to get there. We owe it to our kids; we owe it to our parents.

6.38 pm

Vernon Coaker (Gedling) (Lab): I want to make a brief contribution, picking up on the excellent contribution by my hon. Friend the Member for Leicester West (Liz Kendall). The Minister said earlier that he sent money out to various local authorities, which is welcome, but frankly it is a sticking plaster. It would have been great if he had come and said, “I have heard the outrage and frustration across the country about the number of people who have to stay in hospital because there is no social care for them, people who have inadequate care and people who cannot get the care they deserve, and I am bringing a Green Paper to Parliament today. I will ensure that it is looked at and dealt with as a matter of urgency, and then I will bring a White Paper. We will actually grasp the nettle and sort this out.” The hon. Member for Solihull (Julian Knight), unless I misheard him, rightly agreed. Unless we get a hold of this issue, this debate will happen again in six months, a year, two years and three years.

The Secretary of State challenged my hon. Friend the Member for Worsley and Eccles South (Barbara Keeley) on parties working together. If he has read our manifesto, he will have seen that, before it says how we are going to spend the money, it says that we commit to working on a cross-party basis to sort this out—it says it in the manifesto. But people have to mean what they say. It is no good all of us in the Chamber saying that we agree if, the first time a shadow spokesperson or a Minister gets up and says something, people decry it. That will not work and we will, in the end, let the people of this country down.

That is what I wanted to say, Madam Deputy Speaker. People are raging about this: Parliament should be raging. The Secretary of State and Ministers—they are
Ministers of the Crown—have it within their power to get it sorted. That is what this debate and this Parliament is saying to the ministerial team today: let’s get this sorted. The people out there deserve it.

Several hon. Members rose—

Madam Deputy Speaker (Dame Rosie Winterton): Order. To try to get as many people in as possible I am imposing a three-minute time limit. If people can take less than that, that will obviously help.

James Cartlidge (South Suffolk) (Con): In light of that, Madam Deputy Speaker, I will be as quick as I can. I will make two quick points.

One point that has to be made—I am sorry—is that in every debate on this issue, those on the Labour Front Bench bang on about cuts to local authority spending in the 2010 Parliament, which we accept, and which have been followed up, since 2015, with higher spending. But what did the Labour manifesto promise in 2010? This is absolutely critical. It promised to:

“protect frontline spending on childcare, schools, the NHS and policing”.

It did not promise to protect local government spending. It went on to say:

“We will drive forward our programme to strip out all waste...We recognise that investing more in priority areas will mean cutting back in others.”

Labour would have cut local government spending, the same as we did. And what did it say about how it would pay for its reforms to social care? It said that they would be paid for “through savings and efficiencies in the health budget and in local government.”

There is no parallel universe in which where would have been billions more to spend on local government under Labour.

On a far more positive and constructive note, I have one key point on long-term spending that I would like to make to my hon. Friend the Minister. I agree with my hon. Friend the Member for Thirsk and Malton (Kevin Hollinrake), who has made the point many times about the German system. He has said that we should have more of an insurance-based system for those in the working population. The key issue relates to those who are retired and have assets. My request would simply be for there to be a choice. For example, there should be a choice between relying on your assets if you wish to take that risk, or paying some kind of lump sum or similar insurance fee, which could even be taken from your estate, so that you would be covered. You either share the risk or take the risk. I think that that is a very fair principle. I am not going to say any more than that or take any interventions, because of the time and because I know that others wish to speak. We need to have choice in the system for those with assets.

Laura Smith (Crewe and Nantwich) (Lab): I thank the shadow Secretary of State for mentioning my constituent Joyce, who has literally become the face of hundreds of thousands, maybe more, who are in a similar situation, by featuring on the front cover of Age UK’s aptly named report, “Why Call it Care, When Nobody Cares?”.

Why are people like Joyce being so badly let down? In my opinion, the answer ultimately lies in the marketisation of adult social care. It has been characterised by stealth over four decades, initially as a limited initiative to improve choice and create a competitive mixed economy, and then to the virtual elimination of public sector provision. There has been growing tension between the need for private companies to sustain a profitable business and the needs of vulnerable people for care and support. Local authorities have had an almost impossible task with ever-stretched budgets and they have been reduced to the role of commissioning authorities. What does this result in? Money matters; people’s care does not.

Due to a lack of access to the care system for members of the public, people who pay for their own care, often at very high prices through their homes, their life savings and their pensions, subsidise both state-funded residents and the state. Despite that, the care market in England is highly unstable because of the significant cuts to local government budgets and the growing role of private companies operating business chains based on high risk financial models. We have already seen failures of care homes in my constituency. No serious thought has been given to how to deal with this prospect and the policies that have been introduced are too insubstantial to make any real difference.

I also wish to touch on the sleep-in crisis, on which I, like many others, campaigned for justice. In July 2018, the Court of Appeal delivered a ruling that was a hammer blow for thousands of careworkers who work sleep-in shifts. The Court denied these workers the hourly minimum pay that is the very least that they deserve. In the aftermath of that ruling, Unison—and I—made a commitment to those careworkers and everyone affected that we would keep fighting for what is right. Everyone who understands the work of careworkers knows that sleep-in shifts are working time, so they must be paid that way. If someone is not allowed to leave their place of work, are obliged to be away from their home and family, and are up and down all night caring for those in real need, they are at work and should be paid for it.

The problems in social care are clear, and Labour Members believe that now is the time for action rather than further reviews and more consultations. We will build the national care service that this country deserves: a needs-based compassionate service that provides dignity in later life and promotes independent living for working-age adults with disabilities; that is based on people and not profit; and that, like the NHS, is seen as a wealth creator and not a burden.

Kevin Hollinrake (Thirsk and Malton) (Con): A former US President once said that there are no easy solutions, but there are simple solutions. What we need to solve this problem is a simple, scalable and sustainable solution.

Ideally, when people look for a solution, they try not to invent a new one but to find one that somebody has already used for that problem. That is exactly what the Joint Select Committee inquiry did. It looked at the German system. We looked at it twice, in our earlier report and in the joint report between the Health and
Social Care Committee and the Housing, Communities and Local Government Committee. We looked at it cross-party and unanimously came to the conclusion that this was the right solution for us. It is a social insurance, not a tax.

The hon. Member for Central Ayrshire (Dr Whitford) mentioned that national insurance would be a suitable vehicle. National insurance went the same way as every other hypothecated tax—it was spread around general taxation. That is not the right way; it must be separated from government.

This solution is simple and scalable. It is not easy, but it is simple and cross-party, and I very much hope that both the Opposition and the Government will support it.

6.47 pm

Matt Warman (Boston and Skegness) (Con): I pay tribute to the work not just of the social care workers in my constituency, but of the ambulance service, with whom I recently spent a day on a shift. Over about 10 hours, we saw a mere four jobs, thanks to the geography of Lincolnshire. Three of the four jobs dealt with the consequences of people needing a different social care package from that which the current system is able to provide them with. We need to see the White Paper, but when we look at the reform of the current system, we need to work with the ambulance service and the police, and crucially to bear in mind that this is not simply a problem of ageing. One of the three jobs I mentioned that were about social care support involved a mental health issue. In the current set-up, we are not dealing with the respite care and social care needs of people with mental health problems as well as we are dealing with physical problems. I appeal to the Minister to pay tribute in her closing remarks to those workers—I am sure that she will—and to look at this system in the round.

6.48 pm

Kevin Foster (Torbay) (Con): I will be very quick, given that the Front Benchers are waiting to speak. This is a key debate for Torbay, and I particularly highlight the experience in Torbay of integrated health and social care. Pooling budgets between the council and the local NHS is making a difference. It is a model that needs to be looked at and adopted across the country. Hopefully, given that this is such an issue for my constituency, I will have more than 30 seconds to contribute to a future debate, but at least we have had some time for this issue today.

6.49 pm

Andrew Gwynne (Denton and Reddish) (Lab): I begin by thanking hon. and right hon. Members for their contributions from across the House. It is the convention to mention Members by their contributions. I apologise that, because of the time restrictions that have been put in place, that is not possible.

I pay tribute to all who work in our social care services, whether they work in the NHS or our councils or are paid or unpaid carers. We have been here before. I have a sense of déjà vu. It was in April that we called for immediate action from the Government to address the crisis in social care, yet here we are, months later, and no progress has been made. Since then, we have had a new Health Secretary and a new Communities Secretary, but still no new ideas and still no Green Paper. There is only so much longer this sector can wait.

Given the lack of support from the Government, and in the face of year-on-year cuts, local government has been forced to step up. With the Cabinet too busy squabbling among themselves and in the absence of any Government action, the Local Government Association has published its Green Paper on social care. It is worth the Government considering some of the responses that the consultation received. According to the District Councils Network, the “adult social care crisis is the single largest problem facing local government services and their financial sustainability”.

Karin Smyth: The Green Paper commends Bristol City Council for its Well Aware project. Will my hon. Friend join me in congratulating Bristol on that online and telephone advice and guidance service, which has proven so popular, and will he or the Minister visit to see how it works in practice?

Andrew Gwynne: Absolutely. I am always happy to visit my hon. Friend’s city of Bristol and to see the great work it is doing in very difficult circumstances—Labour local government leading the way and making a difference where it matters.

The LGA estimates that adult social care services face a £3.5 billion funding gap by 2025—just to maintain existing standards of care—but councils in England receive 1.8 million new requests for adult social care a year, the equivalent of almost 5,000 extra cases a day. It is a national scandal. The Government should feel ashamed that 1.4 million older people are now not getting the necessary help to carry out essential tasks, such as washing themselves and dressing. That is 20% more people without care than only two years ago. One of the people experiencing adult social care said of their provision:

“I haven’t washed for over two months. My bedroom floor has only been vacuumed once in three years. My sheets have not been changed in about six months and my pajamas haven’t been changed this year. My care workers don’t have time for cleaning, washing or changing me”.

Those words were taken from a report by the Care and Support Alliance into the state of care in the UK, and it makes for heartbreaking reading, but we have yet to see a Minister even acknowledge that a crisis in local government funding even exists. “We introduced the social care levy,” said the Secretary of State. No, they enabled councils to raise more council tax in a limited way, but a 1% increase in his council’s council tax raises a very different amount from a 1% increase in my area. That only widens the inequalities and the unfairness.

The Secretary of State’s big announcement at the Conservative party conference of an extra £240 million of emergency funding for adult social care should not be celebrated; it should be a source of shame. The Conservative leader of West Sussex Council summed up the response to the announcement:

“I am not skipping round—I am really cross about it. It’s half a crumb. It’s not even a crumb.”

Earlier this year, the former Secretary of State for Health made a candid admission to the British Association of Social Workers, when he accepted his share of responsibility for the lack of progress since the Tories entered government in 2010. The crisis is a result of this
Government’s policies. Our Prime Minister has given up and our councils are at breaking point, but the Government remain committed to their programme of cuts, taking £1.3 billion extra funding out of local government next year. Let that sink in for a moment. It is now being reported that nearly 50% of council heads are seriously worried about impending bankruptcy in their councils, which should send shivers down the spines of members of the Government. One of the chief executives surveyed by the Local Government Chronicle said:

“The next three years are secure if we can manage the demand in adults and children’s services...a complete lack of policy means that even with a well-run council and relatively strong local economy we are likely to start to significantly struggle in 2021/22.”

That is the reality, and that is why I commend our motion to the House.

6.55 pm

The Minister for Care (Caroline Dinenage): In the very limited time that is left to me, I will begin by thanking all the Members who have contributed to the debate. Unfortunately, I shall not have time to name them all, but I want to address some of the points that they have made. I want to reaffirm our commitment to the social care system and to ensuring that it is fit to face the challenges of the future. I also want to look ahead to the Green Paper. Most of all, however, and most importantly, I want to pay tribute to the amazing hard work and dedication of the people—both those in the social care workforce and informal carers—who play such a vital role.

A number of Members, including the hon. Members for Leicester West (Liz Kendall) and for Gedling (Vernon Coaker), made points with which I agreed about the importance of cross-party working and not using this issue as a party political football, but I disagree with the claim made by them and others that we are complacent. We are absolutely not complacent. We absolutely recognise the need to act. It is because of the Government’s prudent actions that overall funding for social care in 2019 will be 8% higher in real terms than it was in 2015. But we also know that there are short-term pressures on local government in particular. That is why we have given councils access to up to £9.64 billion more dedicated funding for social care over the three years up to 2019-20.

Today the Secretary of State reiterated his recent announcement that the Government would provide £240 million for additional adult social care capacity this year, but that is far from our only contribution to the sector. Since 2017-18, we have been able to allow councils to raise their council tax by up to 3% per year, specifically to help them to respond to the pressures facing adult social care. Those additional resources will help councils to commission care services that are sustainable and diverse, and offer sufficient high-quality care. We have seen a real difference in services across the country. We have also discussed winter resilience and allocated £145 million to NHS trusts to upgrade wards and procure beds.

As we have made clear today, the funds that we have already put into the system have stabilised the market and enabled councils to respond to the short-term pressures they are facing, but we are aware of the future challenges faced by the care system, and our Green Paper will also present proposals designed to make our social care system much more sustainable in the long term.

The motion refers to cuts amounting to £1.3 billion. That is wrong. It is entirely misleading to refer only to the revenue support grant when councils have access to council tax, business rate retention, the social care precept, and other funding to deliver their local services. It is right that more of our money that is spent locally is raised locally. In 2010, councils were 80% dependent on Government grants; by 2020, they will be largely funded by council tax and other local revenues. We have been backing councils in England with £200 billion for the delivery of local services in their communities between 2015 and 2020. This year’s settlement includes a £1.3 billion increase in the money available to councils over the next two years, which means that they will have more money to enable them to deliver for their local communities.

The motion claims that 1.4 million older people have unmet needs. By passing the Care Act 2014, the Government established a national threshold that defines the care needs that local authorities must meet—and they can exceed it if they wish. That eliminates the postcode lottery of eligibility across England.

The Secretary of State has announced that the workforce is one of his top three priorities, and he is keen for us to find ways to support staff better and make it easier for them to work in the NHS and social care. To improve engagement, we have launched an online platform, “Talk Health and Care”, to give support workers an opportunity to interact with the Government. We are also launching a recruitment campaign this autumn to raise the image and profile of the care sector. We continue to work with our delivery partner, Skills for Care, to provide a range of resources to attract, train and retain the brightest staff.

The Government are absolutely committed to a social care system that delivers high-quality care for all, and we hope that the Green Paper on care and support that we will publish later in the year will be a catalyst for debate.

Mr Nicholas Brown (Newcastle upon Tyne East) (Lab) claimed to move the closure (Standing Order No. 36).

Question put forthwith, That the Question be now put. Question agreed to. Main Question accordingly put and agreed to. Resolved.

That this House notes that eight years of Government cuts to council budgets have resulted in a social care funding crisis; further notes that 1.4 million older people have unmet social care needs; notes that Government grant funding for local services is set to be cut by a further £1.3 billion in 2019-20, further exacerbating the crisis; recognises that proposals from the Government to invest £240 million will not close that gap; and calls on the Government to close the funding gap for social care this year and for the rest of the Parliament.

6.59 pm

Barbara Keeley: On a point of order, Madam Deputy Speaker. Yet again the Government sit on their hands and refuse to vote on a key social care motion. We have heard in this debate some moving cases of people whose lives are being damaged by the crisis in social care, but no solutions from the new Secretary of State for Health and Social Care. We do not need more warm words...
which we have just heard from the Care Minister and other Ministers. We need action to close the funding gap. If the Government disagree with our motion, they should have the guts to vote on it, and shame on them for not doing so.

Madam Deputy Speaker (Dame Rosie Winterton): The hon. Lady has put her point of view on the record. As I am sure she knows, there have been undertakings by the Government that in response to situations like this there will be a report back to the House at a future date, and I am sure those on the Treasury Bench will have heard the points made.

Business without Debate

DELEGATED LEGISLATION

Madam Deputy Speaker (Dame Rosie Winterton): With the leave of the House, we shall take motions 3 and 4 together.

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

LOCAL GOVERNMENT

That the draft Liverpool City Region Combined Authority (Adult Education Functions) Order 2018, which was laid before this House on 23 July, be approved.

That the draft Tees Valley Combined Authority (Adult Education Functions) Order 2018, which was laid before this House on 23 July, be approved.—[Amanda Milling.]

Question agreed to.

PETITION

Public Land for Public Good: Bootham Park

7.1 pm

Rachael Maskell (York Central) (Lab/Co-op): I rise to present a petition on behalf of my constituents and others further afield concerning the repurposing of the site of Bootham Park Hospital, York—public land for public good.

I thank the exactly 2,000 residents who have signed the petition, and the 6,386 residents who signed it online—a total of 8,386 residents. I am delighted that all public services—local authority, NHS and police—and all political parties support the proposal to repurpose the site for healthcare and a public park, rather than the development of a luxury hotel and luxury apartments.

The petition states:

The petitioners therefore request that the House of Commons urges the Government to accept the proposals put forward by York Teaching Hospital in co-operation with City of York Council to continue providing healthcare for the people of York and to provide affordable and social housing for key-workers who are NHS staff.

Following is the full text of the petition:

[The petition of residents of the United Kingdom, Declares that the publicly owned estates of Bootham Park Hospital should be retained within the health sector using One Public Estate programme for developing integrated health and social care services; further that a sale of the land to the highest bidder will not deliver the social value that is so desperately needed; and further considering the land is adjacent to the acute hospital and is available to reconfigure services to deliver cost effective and modern health care, with a new transitional care unit, urgent care and extra care facilities, with accommodation for the third sector and to retain the public grounds as a new public park for York.

The petitioners therefore request that the House of Commons urges the Government to accept the proposals put forward by York Teaching Hospital in co-operation with City of York Council to continue providing healthcare for the people of York and to provide affordable and social housing for key-workers who are NHS staff.

And the petitioners remain, etc.]

[Petition number P002269]

7.3 pm

The Minister for Security and Economic Crime (Mr Ben Wallace): On a point of order, Madam Deputy Speaker. Last Thursday, the hon. Member for Rhondda (Chris Bryant) asked an urgent question on foreign fighters and the death penalty. During the questions, I was asked whether there had been any previous occasions when the UK Government had shared evidence without seeking or securing death penalty assurances from a foreign Government. In my reply I stated that on two occasions previously such exchanges had taken place under successive Governments. However, I wrongly asserted that the hon. Gentleman himself was a member of the Government at the time of one of these. He was a member of the governing party in the early 2000s, when the occasion happened, but he was not in the Labour Government. For this I apologise to the House and to the hon. Gentleman, and I hope this point of order will serve to correct the record.

Madam Deputy Speaker (Dame Rosie Winterton): I thank the Minister for giving me notice of his point of order. I understand he has also informed the hon. Member for Rhondda (Chris Bryant) of his intention to come to the House to correct the record, and I am sure it will be appreciated that he has done so at the earliest opportunity.
Drugs Trafficking: County Lines

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

7.4 pm

John Woodcock (Barrow and Furness) (Ind): I am really pleased to have been able to secure the Adjournment debate this evening on the crucial matter known as county lines. This long-distance drug running is bringing misery to towns such as Barrow and coastal and rural areas right across the country, as well as to the big cities where the drug gangs operate, where thousands of young people are being coerced into what is effectively—and what is being prosecuted as—modern-day slavery in order to run drugs from the big cities to areas such as mine.

To be clear, there have always been issues of drug dealers getting into other areas, but the scale of the problem is now unprecedented. The Government’s own figures, which I will ask the Minister to confirm, suggest that the problem is spiralling out of control, with an exponential rise in the number of these dedicated mobile phone lines in towns such as mine. People use them to order drugs, which are then couriered by young people, often against their will and under the threat of violence. Communities such as mine are finding themselves awash with drugs, to a level that they have not seen before, and seeing the kind of drug-related violence that has previously marred big cities but has thankfully kept away from towns such as my own.

The Daily Mail reported an excellent investigation on its front page today, and some of the figures were truly astounding. It found that county lines were bringing in around £7 million to drug gangs every single day, which equates to £2.5 billion a year. The new national county lines co-ordination centre, which I am sure the Minister will want to say more about, has revealed that each mobile phone line is making about £5,000 a day. British Transport police said recently that it arrested 476 drug couriers using the railways, of whom more than 100 were classed as frequent travellers.

The effect of county lines on these young people is predictably devastating. The children's charity Safer London believes that 4,000 children are involved in the capital alone. A National Crime Agency report last year showed that nearly every police force area in England and Wales had been affected to some degree. Of the 44 forces, 35 mentioned knife crime linked to county lines and 32 mentioned gun crime. Academic evidence shows that county lines drug-selling gangs are generally much more violent than the local dealers who previously controlled the market.

Last month, I was able to bring together Members of Parliament, senior police officers from across the country, the Minister for Policing and the Fire Service and his opposite number, my hon. Friend the Member for Torfaen (Nick Thomas-Symonds), as well as charities from across the country, to talk about this issue. The representative from the National Crime Agency suggested that, according to the latest estimate, there had been 1,000 county lines in operation last month. That figure suggests an increase of more than a third on the 720 that were reported last year. However, the Daily Mail reports today that that same organisation now estimates the number to be 1,500, which would be a nearly 100% increase in one year. I would be grateful if the Minister could clarify those figures.

Rachael Maskell (York Central) (Lab/Co-op): I am grateful to my hon. Friend for bringing forward this important debate. York has also had a real challenge with county lines. Does he share my concern that North Yorkshire police is going to withdraw its special operation on county lines? Surely all police authorities should be investing in special operations to deal with this issue.

John Woodcock: That does indeed sound concerning, and I can understand why my hon. Friend wonders why that is happening, particularly at a time when police forces are focusing on how they can put more resources into this and achieve more co-ordination. This issue goes beyond the traditionally drawn boundaries between police forces, and therefore requires a greater level of intelligence sharing, co-operation and co-ordination than was used to tackle traditional drug operations in past decades. The message from the seminar was that, yes, greater police powers and more investment in the police are necessary, but also that we cannot simply arrest our way out of this situation. Agencies need to come together, and health, safeguarding and education need to play a role.

Turning to what is happening in Barrow, which is what spurred me to call for this debate and do this work on county lines, 12 people suffered drug-related deaths between December 2016 and April this year—a four-month period. To put that in perspective, there were 66 drug-related deaths per 1 million people nationwide last year, yet Barrow saw 12 such deaths in four months in a town of only 67,000 people. The community is rising to the challenge, which is focused on an estate called Egerton Court, where four of those 12 deaths occurred. By the end of the year, a multi-agency hub will be operating out of Egerton Court to try to remove the stigma, change the culture and show drug dealers that they can no longer ply their pernicious trade with impunity in the area.

However, so much more needs to be done. I want to hear from the Minister about the Government’s latest thinking. I have two proposals that I hope they will consider seriously, and the first relates to the public transport network. In previous years in Barrow and elsewhere, drug dealers would arrive by car and get their produce in using that method. Now, however, younger people are being used, and most of them are reliant on the public transport network because they are too young to drive, so coach drivers, cabbies and train guards can be the eyes and ears of the police service. The Government recognised that with the publicity campaign they launched earlier this year, so I would like to hear about how that is going and how widespread it is.

Posters are not enough on their own, though. I hope that the Minister will agree to speak urgently to his colleagues at the Department for Transport, who are pressing ahead with changes to franchises on so many train lines that pretty much require train operators to remove guards from trains. It is the guards who can detect and pick up on signs when something does not look right. Many of these young people stick out like a sore thumb because they are travelling alone and look vulnerable, so public transport staff can play a vital role in alerting the police.
Ronnie Cowan (Inverclyde) (SNP): I am delighted that the hon. Gentleman acknowledged that we cannot arrest our way out of this problem, but I am a little worried that he wants to bring train guards into this war on drugs. Has he considered the option of regulating and controlling this marketplace, which would take all the power away from criminal gangs?

John Woodcock: The hon. Gentleman is a long-time advocate of the legalisation of drugs, but I do not think that is the route to go down, given the horror that drug use causes, never mind the criminal activity around it. That would not get much support in Barrow.

Properly training public transport staff in what to look for can be a positive thing. I hope that the Home Office will consider investing in training, intervening to stop guards being taken off trains and, importantly, offering rewards to people who are prepared to speak up, tip off the police and stop this trade along the major public transport arteries on which it relies.

Secondly, the Government need to do more to crack down on landlords and property owners who effectively turn a blind eye to this trade, and who get rich off drug money by not asking questions and not looking too closely at what is happening in their property. At the moment, a long-standing provision in the Misuse of Drugs Act 1971 makes it an offence for someone to allow their property to be used in that way, but there has to be absolute proof that they had specific knowledge. That allows too many landlords and, potentially, owners of holiday lets, hotels and caravan parks not to ask questions and to make money by allowing these people into our communities to do incredible damage.

Will the Minister consider changing the burden of proof so that a landlord is required to act, and can be prosecuted if they do not act, where there is reasonable suspicion that their property is being used for cuckooing, with drug dealers coming in to deal from the property temporarily? That is another huge part of the problem, and the vast majority of police forces say that it is happening in their area.

I will leave it there because my right hon. Friend the Member for Enfield North (Joan Ryan) wants to speak, and I am happy for her to do so. I look forward to the Minister’s response.

7.16 pm

Joan Ryan (Enfield North) (Lab): I thank my hon. Friend the Member for Barrow and Furness (John Woodcock) for securing this debate and for the helpful and useful seminar he pulled together last month.

I asked to speak in this debate because I secured a similar debate in Westminster Hall in January, and I am pleased that there is now a debate in this Chamber. In the past year alone we have seen an 85% increase in violent crime in Enfield, which sounds unbelievable. My hon. Friend is right that such county lines criminal activity is increasing week on week. It is an amazing business model, and the children who are involved in it are both victims and perpetrators. The National Crime Agency has warned about this for the past three years in their reports to Government, and the Government are very late in coming to this issue.

Mike Kane (Wythenshawe and Sale East) (Lab): My right hon. Friend is making a powerful point. Child criminal exploitation is on the rise, and it is putting huge demands on our police services. Some 19,000 children were off-rolled in our schools last year, and the Government do not know where 10,000 of them are. Does she think the Government should be investigating the causal link between those two things?

Joan Ryan: Absolutely. This is a hunting ground for those seeking to recruit and groom children into this criminal activity—this business model.

I will not take much time, because we want to hear from the Minister. The serious violence strategy and the national county lines co-ordination centre are welcome steps in the right direction, but they are late and are not enough.

There are some fantastic projects in my area, including the Godwin Lawson Foundation, which goes into schools to educate young people and to support teachers. The North Enfield food bank and Jubilee centre has early intervention programmes and mentoring schemes. Those things work, but organisations do not have the capacity to scale up, which is what they need to do. A multi-agency approach is needed.

We have seen £161 million slashed from our local council budget alone, we will see £1 million taken out of our local public health funding by 2020, and we know that the Government have cut £22 million from the capital’s youth services, which makes it almost impossible to scale up the things that work. We need much more action, but action can only happen if it is resourced. This is a scandal and we need to protect these children, who are vulnerable and are leaving Enfield with every second of every day.

Friend’s constituency. We know that these people are applying the same county lines model in their home area. They are not just leaving London boroughs to do this; they are doing it in London boroughs and outside. That accounts for this rapid growth. Please, Minister, we need more resources to deal with this.

7.20 pm

The Minister for Security and Economic Crime (Mr Ben Wallace): First, let me congratulate the hon. Member for Barrow and Furness (John Woodcock), a near neighbour, as I do not live that far from his constituency, on raising an important issue. Not only has the right hon. Member for Enfield North (Joan Ryan) held a previous debate on it, but I spoke in the good and important Westminster Hall debate held by the hon. Member for West Ham (Lyn Brown). What strikes me about county lines is that sometimes the debate goes from the ground up—from the vulnerability of the young people up—and sometimes it is about the organised criminals at the top coming down. That is the challenge we face with county lines.

County lines gang activity and the associated violence, drug dealing and exploitation has a devastating impact on young people, vulnerable adults and local communities. That includes the impact on the hon. Gentleman’s constituency. As has been reported, last week brought the sentencing of two south London men, drill rappers Daniel Olaloko and Peter Adebayo, who ran a county line from London all the way to Barrow—that is 300 miles. Other areas in Cumbria are also affected: Connor Halliwell and Kieran Howe were sentenced in September for off-rolling in their constituency.

Ronnie Cowan (Inverclyde) (SNP): I am delighted that the hon. Gentleman acknowledged that we cannot arrest our way out of this problem, but I am a little worried that he wants to bring train guards into this war on drugs. Has he considered the option of regulating and controlling this marketplace, which would take all the power away from criminal gangs?

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The plus side of those convictions is that some of those people were the leaders of organised crime groups in London, and it was not just low-level individuals who were taken out. One reason we have seen a shift of London organised crime groups to Barrow—the hon. Gentleman will be interested in this—is the work that was done regionally, through the organised crime unit, to take out some of the Merseyside gangs that were blighting north Lancashire and Barrow. The gap left by their displacement has been filled with London organised crime groups. With the technology that they use, they can be quick to exploit gaps and vulnerably.

Let me try to answer the point made by the hon. Member for York Central (Rachael Maskell) about North Yorkshire police. All the work we have done on tackling county lines shows that some of the best ways to respond to the organised crime group is through the region, rather than just through the home force. The home force can play a role at spotting exploitation and cuckooing, but if we are to cut the head of the snake in the organised crime groups, it is often best done through the organised crime unit. I am sure that if she were to engage with her regional organised crime unit, the people there would be able to show her some of the work going on across the whole of Yorkshire. I do not think that it would be a case of the police not doing it; I suspect they have moved it into a regional or even a national response as a way to tackle some of the challenges and ensure they have the specialties needed to take on some of the secure communications these people use.

John Woodcock: If the current co-ordination efforts do not prove sufficient, is the Minister alive to the possibility of designating a lead force, in the manner that the Met works on counter-terror for the whole country?

Mr Wallace: I know that the hon. Gentleman has called for that. The national county lines co-ordination centre is about trying to fill that space. It is not just a couple of desks: it is more than 40 officers and staff, centred, pulling together not only the intelligence, but some of the investigations and response. They are making sure the investigations are in the right place, so that where we pick up someone who is low-level, we can trace across to an organised crime group that is already under investigation by the Met, for example. That is one of the main aims of this co-ordinated approach—the county lines co-ordination centre. I have arranged for some hon. Members to get a briefing by the National Crime Agency on that, and I am happy to facilitate that for the hon. Gentleman if he would like.

Time is tight, so I will not be able to deal with all the points, but I will write to the hon. Gentleman about some of the figures. We recognise the figures that he used. We assess around 1,500 lines in service as of July. The improvements from the national county lines co-ordination centre’s work with the National Crime Agency and the National Police Chiefs Council has started to have an impact already. Last week, the centre co-ordinated the first in a series of regular intensifications of activity targeting county lines. In one week alone, there were more than 200 arrests; 58 vulnerable people, including a number of children, were identified and safeguarded; deadly weapons, including hunting knives, a firearm with ammunition, an axe, a meat cleaver and a samurai sword, were seized; tens of thousands of pounds of suspected criminal cash were seized; and significant quantities of heroin, crack cocaine and other illegal drugs were seized. That is in one week, which shows the benefit of that co-ordination. Whether it is a single force or, I would venture, a co-ordination centre, that shows what can be done when we focus and bring our efforts to bear.

We need to be clever about how we prosecute these individuals. In some cases, we prosecute them under the Modern Slavery Act 2015 for in effect trafficking the children up and down the country. On 4 October, Zakaria Mohammed was sentenced to 14 years for human trafficking offences, but he was leading a county lines drug cartel operation. That was an important way to deal with it.

Ronnie Cowan: The Minister is outlining success stories—big arrests, big sentences and big drug seizures—yet the problems continue to get worse. Is it not perhaps time to consider other tactics?

Mr Wallace: The problems are getting worse, and this business model is a fantastic business model, as the right hon. Member for Enfield North said, partly because of the turbo boost that communications give these people. Secure communication and end-to-end encryption mean that people can order with total impunity, because it is very hard for us to get into the telephones to see what they are doing. They can use modern technology to resupply and communicate, and to launder the money at the same time. I do not agree that the approach should be to legalise drugs. In my experience, criminals are interested in the margins, not the product. If we legalise one drug, they will push fentanyl tomorrow; if we legalise fentanyl, it will be another. They want the margin: in my experience, it is the money that drives them, which is why we have to do more work.

The right hon. Member for Enfield North correctly talked about prevention. We need to harden the environment. The hon. Member for Barrow and Furness is always full of good ideas, and he will have seen in our latest counter-terrorism Bill that I have absorbed some of them. I think that is a polite way to say that I have nicked them. I certainly believe that he is right about somehow making sure that people take responsibility. We cannot arrest our way out of this problem, so we have to burden-share. We have to educate the public. We have to educate taxi drivers in Barrow. Both modern slavery and county lines often hide in plain sight. It is amazing how many people in effect work in slavery on our high streets and no one does anything about it or thinks about it. Someone might have had their nails done but never said to themselves that most of the women working in the nail bar were probably—more often than not—victims of human trafficking. That is why we have to try to encourage part of the wider community—the hon. Gentleman may say we should legislate—because they have a role to play.

When I saw a Merseyside county lines group get taken apart, it was brilliant to see the way the Merseyside local authority worked alongside the local police. When it came to dismantling the group, the people who needed care got care and the people who needed to be prosecuted—some of them were young; they are not all
vulnerable—were prosecuted. One challenge we have is that not all the 15 or 16-year-olds are exploited; some of them are pretty hard and dangerous. At the same time, we took some assets, and in the end the Merseyside police, in public, pulled down the gates of the organised crime group’s house, to show that permissive society was not going to tolerate that behaviour. That group’s operations went all the way into Lancashire, so it was a good success.

I absolutely hear what the right hon. Member for Enfield North said about the need for better prevention, community provision and diversion for these young people. I have a list as long as my arm that I think I sent to some Members in the context of the previous debate on this subject. We have the anti-knife crime community fund. The Home Secretary has announced a £22 million early intervention youth fund and a £200 million youth endowment fund. There is an £11 million modern slavery innovation fund, which is all about trying to deal with that in the communities and how we can wrap around it.

We also support and fund local authorities that are engaged in mapping county lines. I definitely urge hon. Members to encourage their local authority to seek to do that, and the Home Office and the police will support them in delivering such action—with our funding rather than theirs. In that way, local authorities can get an understanding of what is going on in their very community. It is a phenomenon. Although I understand the pressure on the police—I am not deaf to the challenges around that and to the fact that more will need to be done—the biggest single contribution from what I have observed has been mobile communications, encryption and money laundering in a way that is so different from the past. Those lines can be run from the very top of an organised crime group in Colombia. The group can order, resupply and get delivery so that drugs arrive on the doorsteps of our communities.

We all have a role to play—a really strong role—to make sure that schools do not go down the exclusion route, because that puts many of those young people out on the streets to be preyed upon. We have to do a lot of work around the permissive society. What we find is that there are a few areas—they are significant and solid—where these crime routes are coming. There are communities that are permitting the organised crime routes to become strong enough to send people into our communities. Work on permissive societies is something that we all have to address.

Organised crime might involve someone buying an illegal pack of cigarettes behind a bar. They might say that it does not really matter—a bit of a knock-off at the local bar—but people do not realise that that pack of cigarettes is moved by people who move women on a Monday and children on a Tuesday, and flog drugs on a Thursday. Someone might say, “Wink, wink, I got this a bit cheap down the local bar,” but that person is fuelling and helping organised crime. We all have a role to play. We must tackle permissive societies, harden the environment, get everyone knowledgeable about what is out there to stop young people being exploited and help our local authorities to deal with those cases. It will be a growing issue. Co-ordination, planning and investment will be key. I from my end and the organised crime end will help to support such action through the serious organised crime strategy, which is due to be launched very soon, and I know that the Minister responsible for crime reduction is keen to tackle this from the bottom up. We will make sure that we work across the Government and across parties to try to achieve that.

Question put and agreed to.

7.31 pm

House adjourned.
In my role as Minister with responsibility for food, I am working very closely with others to ensure that we will move on all these issues, whether vets or preparations at the borders.

Meg Hillier (Hackney South and Shoreditch) (Lab/Co-op): At the Public Accounts Committee on Monday, we heard from DEFRA officials about preparedness for Brexit, and we are very concerned. One of the biggest concerns is that many businesses do not know what they will have to do to comply with the rules around Brexit. What is the Minister doing to make sure that real effort is going into telling those companies and businesses how they should be preparing?

David Rutley: The hon. Lady makes a very important point. The Government have been setting out technical notices to explain more about what needs to be done in readiness for a no deal scenario. Yesterday, along with the Secretary of State, I met the Food and Drink Sector Council. We are working hard to increase engagement with businesses on the back of those technical notices.

Deidre Brock (Edinburgh North and Leith) (SNP): This year we saw the highest-quality fruit and veg grown on these islands rotting in the fields because there were not enough workers to pick them. Yesterday the chair of the Migration Advisory Committee said that the fruit and veg sector would shrink if its policies were followed—that would mean farmers going out of business. Does the Minister agree with him that that is a price worth paying, or does he agree with me that ending freedom of movement is a huge mistake?

David Rutley: I am not sure that that really fits in with the question, but an important pilot is being taken forward on seasonal workers to address the issues that the hon. Lady raises.

Tree Planting

1. David Linden (Glasgow East) (SNP): What recent discussions he has had with Cabinet colleagues on maintaining food and drink standards after the UK has left the EU.

2. Eddie Hughes (Walsall North) (Con): What steps he is taking to increase tree planting.

3. Alex Chalk (Cheltenham) (Con): What steps he is taking to increase tree planting.

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs (David Rutley): DEFRA is working closely with the Food Standards Agency and the Department of Health and Social Care to ensure that the regulatory regime for food and drink standards and safety remains robust as the UK leaves the European Union, in order to continue protecting the public and retaining the confidence of consumers, businesses and trading partners overseas. The Secretary of State meets Cabinet colleagues on a weekly basis, when discussions take place on the future relationship the UK will have with the EU.

David Linden: The National Audit Office’s report on DEFRA’s readiness for Brexit says that the Department “will be unable to process the increased volume of export health certificates” on current capacity and that “consignments of food could be delayed at the border or prevented from leaving the UK.” Ports will be gridlocked and the quality produce of Scottish farmers will not reach its foreign markets. There is a spreadsheet to take the place of the EU’s TRACES system—how does the Minister intend to fix this by March?

David Rutley: The NAO report also highlighted that there is a high degree of readiness within DEFRA. We have recruited 1,300 people to take this work forward.
particular the five saplings project, made possible by the work of the Woodland Trust, Sainsbury’s and ITV—the right hon. Member for Birkenhead (Frank Field) is also to be commended. Like my hon. Friend, I look forward to planting saplings in my constituency soon, in Macclesfield, and I am pleased that many other colleagues across the House will shortly be doing the same.

Alex Chalk: Trees are carbon sinks that lock in greenhouse gases while promoting biodiversity, so what steps is my hon. Friend taking to press forward with forestry investment zones for large-scale woodland creation?

David Rutley: I am grateful to my hon. Friend for his question and his keen interest in the need to drive forward ambitious plans to plant more trees. He is a tree champion in his own right. Our national tree champion, Sir William Worsley, is launching the first forestry investment zone pilot in Cumbria today. That new project will help landowners to create vital new woodland and unlock the economic benefits of forestry in areas not traditionally used for tree planting. The project will also provide lessons on how best to support forestry investment.

Mr Speaker: I call Tom Tugendhat, who has Question 6. Where is the fella? He is not here. I hope he is not indisposed. I think it is more likely that the hon. Gentleman is planting a tree.

Rachael Maskell (York Central) (Lab/Co-op): Trees play a vital role in upper catchment management, by preventing flooding. Environment Agency representatives said in a meeting last week that upper catchment management needs prioritisation. How is the Minister planning for that, and will he ensure that there is provision for it in the Budget?

David Rutley: I know that the hon. Lady has a keen interest in that issue. I will be working closely with the Under-Secretary of State, my hon. Friend the Member for Suffolk Coastal (Dr Coffey), to take these activities forward.

Jim Shannon (Strangford) (DUP): I welcome the Minister’s response. On my land back home, we have planted some 3,500 trees over time, but the important thing is to have trees planted by young people. The Woodland Trust in Northern Ireland, led by Patrick Cregg, is running a scheme whereby every school will plant a tree. Has the Department had an opportunity to engage with the Woodland Trust and education providers to make that happen?

David Rutley: The hon. Gentleman makes an important point. We need to get young people connected with trees and the importance of woodland, and we are working closely with the Woodland Trust on exactly that initiative.

Theresa Villiers (Chipping Barnet) (Con): Given the huge importance of trees to our environment and our quality of life, does the Minister agree that we must ensure that the planning system protects protected trees and woodland wherever it can when new development is being considered?

David Rutley: Yes, that is really important. I think my right hon. Friend will also welcome our commitment to ensure that we will see 1 million more trees in our towns and cities. Trees play a vital role not just in the countryside and more generally but in our towns and close to urban areas.

Sue Hayman (Workington) (Lab): Tree planting is important for ecological diversity and protecting vital habitats. Sites of special scientific interest protect the UK’s most important places for trees and wildlife, but a Greenpeace investigation has found that almost half of SSSIs have not been examined in the last six years, as required by national guidelines. Now that the Prime Minister has announced an end to austerity, what new resources will the Minister commit to, to reverse the alarming neglect and decline of habitats and species across the UK?

David Rutley: That is an important issue. Natural England is focusing carefully on the SSSIs that are most at risk and will ensure that those resources are targeted, for maximum impact in those vital areas.

Sue Hayman: If the Minister cannot commit to new resources for our habitats, what commitments can we expect in the Budget to restore our beloved local parks, which are so important to the environment, health and local communities? Will the Minister confirm how much funding the Government’s parks action group has been allocated and how many of the group’s recommendations he has delivered?

David Rutley: Clearly we will have to wait and see what comes up in the Budget on 29 October, but we are working closely with the parks Minister on that agenda.
Nick Smith (Blaenau Gwent) (Lab): What plans does the Secretary of State have to build more public drinking fountains across the UK?

Michael Gove: I will not be building them myself, but—[Interruption.]

Mr Speaker: That is extremely disappointing.

Michael Gove: With your permission, Mr Speaker, perhaps at Holland Park comprehensive we could make it part of the design and technology projects that our respective children are engaged in, to ensure that there are drinking fountains in west London and beyond.

We are working with water companies and other commercial operators to ensure that drinking fountains are more widespread. It was a great Victorian innovation to bring clean drinking water to everyone and ensure that we did not have to rely on private provision for the very stuff of life. We will ensure that there are more drinking fountains, and further steps will be announced later this year.

Neil Parish (Tiverton and Honiton) (Con): Some 3 billion litres of water a day are leaking out of water companies’ infrastructure pipes, which is enough to fill 1,273 Olympic swimming pools. Private companies have invested a lot of money in infrastructure in the past, but are they now spending too much on shareholders and chief executives, and not enough on actually securing the infrastructure? We need to save water, especially at a time of drought.

Michael Gove: My hon. Friend is absolutely right. One of the things I have said to the water companies is that in the past few years they have spent far too much on financial engineering and not enough on real engineering. As a result, new targets have been set to reduce leakage in order to both protect the environment and help consumers. One thing that would not help consumers, I am afraid, is Labour’s programme to renationalise the water companies, which would mean taxpayers’ money going into the hands of the same shareholders, rather than being spent on our environment.

Tim Farron (Westmorland and Lonsdale) (LD): The Environment Agency’s welcome and overdue plans for flood defences in Kendal suggest that they will be built to withstand a one-in-100-year storm event, yet the water companies, such as United Utilities, are required to meet only a one-in-30-year storm event. That means we could be at the mercy of drain waters while being protected from our rivers. Will the Secretary of State force the water companies to delve into their vast profits and keep communities such as Kendal, Burneside, Grange and Windermere safe from flooding?

Michael Gove: That is a very fair point made in a characteristically acute way by the hon. Gentleman. I know that he has been in correspondence with the Minister responsible, and we will do everything we can to ensure that communities are protected and water companies such as United Utilities live up to their responsibilities.

Dame Caroline Spelman (Meriden) (Con): On 27 May, 300 homes in my constituency were badly affected by a one-in-900-year flooding event. In response to my concerns, Severn Trent has fitted new depth monitors in their water pipes. Is that not precisely the sort of investment that we need the water industry to make in the face of the challenge of climate change?

Michael Gove: My right hon. Friend is absolutely correct. First, I should congratulate Liv Garfield of Severn Trent Water for the progressive measures that she has taken, which my right hon. Friend mentions. More broadly, the challenge of climate change—as graphically pointed out by the Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change and by the chair of the Environment Agency, Sir James Bevan—requires us all to take further steps to make sure that our communities are safe.

John Grogan (Keighley) (Lab): Is the Secretary of State concerned about the quantity of raw sewage that is being discharged into our rivers by many water companies?

Michael Gove: Yes, absolutely. Remedial action must be taken.

Sir Patrick McLoughlin (Derbyshire Dales) (Con): Will the Secretary of State ensure that lessons are learned from last winter’s disruption to water supplies for many communities? One of the great problems last year was the inability of the water companies to communicate to local residents what was actually happening. Will the Secretary of State ensure that those lessons are learned, and that that is not repeated should such a circumstance happen this year?

Michael Gove: My right hon. Friend makes a very important point. Earlier this year, the Minister responsible had two roundtables with water companies to make sure that appropriate lessons were learned. In particular, Members of this House from across the divide made it clear that Thames Water in particular needed to pull its socks up.

Recycling

4. Mary Creagh (Wakefield) (Lab): What recent steps he has taken to increase the level of recycling. [907138]

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs (Dr Thérèse Coffey): Recycling has been increasing since 2010. Over 70% of packaging has been recycled or recovered, which is ahead of the EU target of 60%, and the figure for plastic packaging, at 45%, is double the EU target. England’s household recycling rate has also continued to increase, but we need to do more. We will be publishing our resources and waste strategy shortly.

Mary Creagh: I am sure the whole House will wish to join me in congratulating my hon. Friend the Member for Halifax (Holly Lynch) on the birth of her beautiful baby boy, James, a couple of weeks ago.

Fashion should not cost the earth, but every year 300,000 tonnes of garments are disposed into landfill. Will the Minister ensure that the forthcoming resources and waste strategy includes something to force clothing producers to take account of the end use of the garments that they produce?
Dr Coffey: I know that is the subject of an inquiry that the hon. Lady’s Environmental Audit Committee is undertaking at the moment. The Government, with our partner the Waste and Resources Action Programme, have been working with the Ellen MacArthur Foundation on this issue, and I am sure she will recognise how it is being addressed.

Mark Pawsey (Rugby) (Con): It is important to improve recycling rates in areas such as on-the-go packaging. Does the Minister agree that in this area it is better to extend the existing packaging recovery note system, which keeps funds within the system for improvement, recycling and restructuring, than to introduce an expensive deposit return scheme in which funds will be lost, including on reverse vending machines that cost up to £32,000 each?

Dr Coffey: My hon. Friend has great experience of the packaging industry, so I know he speaks with authority. We are reforming the PRN system, but we also believe the deposit return scheme is an appropriate way to increase the amount of recycling and to reduce littering. That will, however, be subject to consultation.

Several hon. Members rose—

Mr Speaker: If I can encourage the hon. Member for City of Durham (Dr Blackman-Woods) to overcome any unnecessary shyness, and in light of the fact that we are not likely to reach question 13, I would say to her that her question is very similar to this question, so perhaps she would like to make her point now.

Dr Roberta Blackman-Woods (City of Durham) (Lab): I was hoping we would get to question 7, but thank you very much, Mr Speaker.

In July this year, the National Audit Office produced a report that was very critical of DEFRA’s oversight of the scheme, which sends half of all our mostly plastic recycling material abroad, mainly to China. With China indicating that it intends to stop the importation of solid and plastic waste, what is DEFRA going to do? How is it going to massively reduce plastic waste in this country, and when will we see the resources and waste strategy?

Dr Coffey: Plastic waste exports happen because overseas processors recognise the value of how it can be used. I am conscious that plastic with a certain contamination level no longer goes to China. Other countries have taken it up, but of course we want more to be recycled here in the UK. The hon. Lady will see more in our resources and waste strategy, which will be published very soon.

Sir Desmond Swayne (New Forest West) (Con): Does my hon. Friend plan to rescue humanity from the blight of disposable nappies?

Dr Coffey: Disposable nappies have become a consumer convenience. I am very pleased that Procter & Gamble has invested in technology, which we see in Italy. We are encouraging it to bring it here, not only for disposable nappies but other forms of absorbent hygiene products.

We can do something about this, but I am not convinced that we will be seeing an end to the disposable nappy any time soon.

Graham Stringer (Blackley and Broughton) (Lab): One of the barriers to the successful recycling of plastic is that many simple packaging materials are actually made up of composite plastic with a number of polymers, which is particularly difficult to recycle. Will the Minister consider bringing in regulations to simplify this packaging?

Dr Coffey: I am pleased to say that the Government have been working with a mixture of organisations, retailers and manufacturers to try to simplify the polymers that are being used. Technical innovations will need to happen, but I am confident that some good news will be coming out very shortly.

Plastic Pollution

7. Vicky Ford (Chelmsford) (Con): What steps he is taking to reduce the amount of plastic pollution.

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs (Dr Thérèse Coffey): In addition to the Government’s ban on microbeads in rinse-off personal care products, and removing nearly 16 billion plastic bags from circulation with the 5p carrier charge, plastic pollution in our marine environment is a global challenge, which is why I was pleased that we had the blue charter at the Commonwealth summit this year, and that the UK and Vanuatu are to establish the Commonwealth clean oceans alliance. The Global Plastic Action Partnership was initiated in the United Kingdom and was launched in New York last month at the UN General Assembly. It will be instrumental in delivering those commitments.

Vicky Ford: We know that plastic pollution is a problem at home and across the globe. In developing countries especially, it contributes to blocked drains, increasing flooding and disease and exacerbating poverty. Will the Minister provide a bit more detail on how the Global Plastic Action Partnership will help to alleviate pollution and poverty?

Dr Coffey: At the Commonwealth summit, we highlighted more than £66 million that we will be spending to help Commonwealth countries in particular to tackle this issue, including by increasing the professionalism of waste management. The Global Plastic Action Partnership goes beyond that to cover the world. It is a public-private partnership. I am pleased to say that we have invested £2.5 million in it, and we are now getting funding in from Canada, PepsiCo, Coca-Cola and Dow Chemical—and more companies are joining.

Luke Pollard (Plymouth, Sutton and Devonport) (Lab/Co-op): The amount of UK plastic going into our oceans remains an international scandal. Following the publication of the long-awaited 25-year environment plan, will the Minister set out when we will see legislation to enshrine those warm words into law and to make sure that action on plastic is not only firm but in the statute book and enforceable against those who are still putting plastic into our oceans at home and abroad?
Dr Coffey: It is suggested that about 80% of the plastic litter that goes into oceans around our country—it goes out of our rivers and into the sea—comes from land-based litter, so it is something on which we are focused with our litter strategy, and we will keep working on that. As the hon. Gentleman will be aware, the Prime Minister has announced that there will be an environment Bill in the next Session.

**European Food Safety Authority**

8. Stephen Pound (Ealing North) (Lab): What discussions he has had with Cabinet colleagues on UK participation in the European Food Safety Authority after the UK leaves the EU. [907143]

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs (David Rutley): After our departure from the EU, our priority will be to maintain the UK’s high standards of food safety. We are considering options for the future of risk assessment and scientific advice in the UK as part of the exit negotiations. We are seeking to retain the long tradition of close scientific collaboration with the EFSA. The Secretary of State meets Cabinet colleagues weekly at Cabinet, and through relevant Sub-Committees, where discussions take place on the future relationship that the UK will have with the EU and associated bodies.

Stephen Pound: I appreciate that the Minister has already addressed a similar question from the hon. Member for Glasgow East (David Linden), but this contribution should not be seen in any way as evidence of collusion between me and the Scottish National party. As we move from—to use Fintan O’Toole’s phrase—the “epic dream” of Brexit to the nightmare reality, we find ourselves having to deal with more and more aspects of minutiae. I implore the Minister not to forget the dairy farmers of Northern Ireland and, particularly in this area, to concentrate on discussions with Cabinet colleagues so that we do not let down those dairy farmers who face a terrible future as a result of that disastrous decision of June 2016.

David Rutley: I had never really thought of the hon. Gentleman as colluding. He is incredibly independently minded—we respect him for that—and forthright in his views.

The hon. Gentleman makes an important point. We will do all that we can to support dairy farmers across the UK, not least in Cheshire, where I also have many dairy farmers. Of course, we will be working across the board not only to ensure that the best possible standards of food safety are maintained, but to support agriculture as we move to a world outside the EU.

**Seasonal Agricultural Workers Scheme**

9. Jeremy Lefroy (Stafford) (Con): What progress the Government have made on reintroducing a seasonal agricultural workers scheme. [907144]

The Minister for Agriculture, Fisheries and Food (George Eustice): The Government have announced that we will introduce a new pilot scheme for 2019-20 to enable up to 2,500 non-European economic area migrant workers to come into the UK to undertake seasonal employment in horticulture. On 18 September, DEFRA published further details on the pilot and opened the selection process for operators through a request for information. The industry had until 17 October to respond, and we will now be working with colleagues in the Home Office to develop the pilot.

Jeremy Lefroy: I thank the Minister very much for his reply. Recently I visited PDM Produce, which is in my constituency and that of my hon. Friend the Member for The Wrekin (Mark Pritchard). It produces millions of lettuces a month for the UK market and imports from Europe in the off-season. It is really concerned because while it welcomes the new pilot, that is not nearly enough to ensure that it can continue to produce for the UK market, which could have an impact on our balance of payments and the prices of lettuces and salad in the shops.

George Eustice: My hon. Friend raises an important point, but he should acknowledge that this is a pilot involving the small number of 2,500 people. Typically, when the previous SAW scheme ran from 1945 until 2013, in the region of 20,000 to 30,000 people came in under the scheme each year.

Kerry McCarthy (Bristol East) (Lab): The charity Focus on Labour Exploitation—FLEX—has warned that the scheme to which the Minister referred involving temporary visas for non-EU workers to work on British farms could lead to a sharp rise in exploitation if there are ties to a particular employer. Later today, to mark Anti-Slavery Day, I will lead a debate on ending the exploitation and slavery of workers in the supermarket supply chain. Is the Minister aware of those concerns and will he follow this afternoon’s debate? This is one of the worst sectors for modern slavery and the exploitation of workers, so can he make sure that he is on the case?

George Eustice: The Gangmasters and Labour Abuse Authority regulates all labour providers, including by looking at issues such as accommodation and its costs. There was no evidence that this particular scheme was abused, but there are issues of the type of abuse that the hon. Lady talked about. The GLAA always takes strict action when it finds that is necessary.

Mr Philip Hollobone (Kettering) (Con): Why on earth can we not find enough British workers to do these seasonal agricultural jobs?

George Eustice: We have full employment and the lowest unemployment since the early 1970s. It is a very scarce labour market, and it has always been the case that some sectors in horticulture have required overseas labour—seasonal labour—to support their needs.

Alan Brown (Kilmarnock and Loudoun) (SNP): Given the massive gap between how many seasonal agricultural workers are required and the numbers involved in the minuscule pilot, how will the Minister cherry-pick the minority of businesses that can work on the pilot and have their fruit and veg picked, while the majority will see the fruit and veg left to rot in the fields?

George Eustice: I disagree with the hon. Gentleman. We still have free movement from the European Union at the moment, and most businesses are able to meet...
their labour needs from the EU. The pilot will be for non-EEA countries, and if it is successful, we shall be able to roll out a broader scheme.

**Animal Cruelty: Prison Sentences**

10. **Diana Johnson** (Kingston upon Hull North) (Lab): When he plans to bring forward legislative proposals to increase the length of prison sentences for animal cruelty.

**The Secretary of State for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs (Michael Gove):** The Government will increase the custodial maximum penalty for animal cruelty from six months’ to five years’ imprisonment. The legislation needed to implement the increase will be introduced as soon as parliamentary time allows.

**Diana Johnson:** Ten months ago, the Secretary of State told me that he would examine proposals to expedite legislation to introduce an increase in the sentence for animal cruelty. Given cross-party support, the support of the general public and the brilliant campaigning of Battersea Dogs & Cats Home, can the Secretary of State now give us a timetable for when that will actually happen?

**Michael Gove:** I know that the Leader of the House, who will be here shortly, will have heard that eloquent plea from the hon. Lady, and I add my voice to hers.

**Scott Mann** (North Cornwall) (Con): Animal cruelty extends to the way in which an animal is slaughtered. When will there be legislation to ensure that halal meat is properly labelled in supermarkets?

**Michael Gove:** My hon. Friend raises an issue of great concern to many. One of the things that we are doing is consulting religious communities and others to establish what changes, if any, may be required.

**Angela Smith** (Penistone and Stocksbridge) (Lab): There is a fairly simple way of ensuring that this measure is implemented: introducing and then supporting a private Member’s Bill. Will the Secretary of State support any Member who introduces such a Bill?

**Michael Gove:** That decision is above my pay grade—it would be made by the Chief Whip and the Leader of the House—but, as I indicated to the hon. Member for Kingston upon Hull North (Diana Johnson), I am passionately keen to see an end to animal cruelty.

**Mr Speaker:** Mike Wood? Not here. Well, we cannot conclude these proceedings without hearing from Mr Tom Pursglove.

**Forests: Development Leases**

12. **Tom Pursglove** (Corby) (Con): What assessment he has made of the adequacy of the provisions of the 125-year leases for developments between Forest Holidays and the Forestry Commission to protect the environment surrounding those developments.

**The Secretary of State for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs (Michael Gove):** In response to concerns that have been raised about Forest Holidays, my Department has initiated a review of the governance and commercial arrangements for its management of its estate.

**Tom Pursglove:** Local people in Corby and East Northamptonshire feel strongly that Fineshade wood, which is stunning, tranquil and extremely well used, must be preserved for generations to come. Will my right hon. Friend agree to meet me, and representatives of the Friends of Fineshade, to discuss what can be done to ensure that Forest Holidays’ long-standing interest in the site finally comes to an end?

**Michael Gove:** My hon. Friend represents some of the most attractive woodland in the country. Not just Fineshade wood but Rockingham forest make Corby and East Northamptonshire a place of pilgrimage for many who want seclusion and peace in a rural environment. I should be delighted to meet his constituents, and I think that his concerns are very well placed.

**Topical Questions**

T1. [907150] **Liz Twist** (Blaydon) (Lab): If he will make a statement on his departmental responsibilities.

**The Secretary of State for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs (Michael Gove):** You and I, Mr Speaker, are very keen to ensure that there is appropriate protection for endangered species. We all know that charismatic megafauna and apex predators—the big beasts that attract public attention, and those at the top of the food chain—are increasingly under threat. That was why, at last week’s illegal wildlife trade conference, a London declaration commanded the support of more than 50 nations, all pledged to support our world-leading ivory ban and the other measures that we take to ensure that the species that we value are protected as part of an ecosystem that we can all cherish.

**Mr Speaker:** I am deeply obliged to the Secretary of State, I am sure.

**Liz Twist:** How does the Government’s strong support for fracking, against the wishes of communities who are worried about their local environment, fit in with the Secretary of State’s vision of a green Brexit?

**Michael Gove:** It fits in perfectly. One thing we all know is that we will need a mix of energy sources in the future. Thanks to the leadership of this Government—I must single out for praise my right hon. Friend the Minister for Energy and Clean Growth—we have seen a dramatic reduction in carbon dioxide emissions alongside economic growth, but hydrocarbons are a critical part of our future energy mix, and hydraulic fracturing will be an important part of that. We need only look at countries such as Germany that have, as a direct result of pursuing the wrong policies, increased greenhouse gas emissions and also not played their part in both dealing with climate change and ensuring that we have the required electricity for ultra low emission vehicles and everything else that will be part of a green future. It is absolutely critical that we are hard-headed and realistic; Conservative Members are, unlike sadly, on this one occasion, the Opposition.

**Mr Speaker:** We are having an oratorical feast today. It is just a terrible shame that the right hon. Member for South Holland and The Deepings (Mr Hayes) is not here, because I feel sure that he would have added to the flow of oratory.
Luke Graham (Ochil and South Perthshire) (Con): I welcome my right hon. Friend’s announcement on the convergence funding review, which hopefully will lead to fair funding for Scottish farmers, and also his further announcement about ring-fencing future agricultural funding so that my farmers are protected and not lumped together in other Government funding. Will my right hon. Friend ask the Scottish National party to work with this Government to make sure that Scotland is included in the Agriculture Bill so that we get a fair deal for my farmers and our constituencies?

Michael Gove: I thank my hon. Friend and other Scottish Conservative Members who pressed for this review and collaborated to make sure its terms of reference were right. As a result, they have guaranteed a brighter future for Scottish farmers with a level of funding in Scotland, Wales and Northern Ireland that is higher than that in England absolutely guaranteed in the future. My hon. Friend is absolutely right to say that the Scottish Government and their Minister, Fergus Ewing, who is a great man in many ways, have, sadly, missed the opportunity to put forward an amendment to our Agriculture Bill in order to ensure that Scottish farmers have certainty in the future. Welsh Labour has collaborated and its statesmanship is to be commended; what a pity that once again the Scottish Government are letting down rural Scotland.

Dr David Drew (Stroud) (Lab/Co-op): When did the Minister receive the Godfray review on the Government’s bovine TB strategy? When will he publish it, and will he commit to publishing it in full?

Michael Gove: Recently, shortly and yes.

Mr Speaker: We are grateful.

Alex Chalk (Cheltenham) (Con): When does the Secretary of State expect to announce a plastic bottle deposit scheme?

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs (Dr Thérèse Coffey): My hon. Friend is a great champion of the environment, especially in Cheltenham. He will be conscious that this is not a straightforward scheme to introduce. I recognise that many people will have seen such a scheme in other countries around the world, and while the front end is very simple, the back end is more challenging. We want a system that works across the four nations of the United Kingdom, and we are continuing to work on that.

Dr Coffey: I received a copy of that report just this week. The Dogs Trust does fantastic work. We have worked with it already on dealing with some of the problems of puppy farming, and once we leave the EU—when I hope we will be a listed country for pet travel—we can also review other steps that we might take.

Robert Courts (Witney) (Con): The Secretary of State will remember meeting me recently to discuss the issue of pollution in the River Windrush, which is a matter of great concern to the people of West Oxfordshire, as shown by the strong attendance at West Oxfordshire District Council’s recent water day. I applaud my right hon. Friend’s speech in March in which he took the water companies to task for their performance, but will he elaborate on what steps he is taking to ensure that they improve their performance across all areas?

Michael Gove: I was grateful to my hon. Friend for raising his constituents’ concerns about the condition of the River Windrush, and he is absolutely right to do so. We have subsequently got a commitment through Ofwat, the regulator, for all water companies to spend more on making sure that the environment that they safeguard is protected.

John Grogan (Keighley) (Lab): Does the Secretary of State agree with those experts who argue that the UK has sufficient incineration capacity and that to increase it further could imperil recycling rates?

Michael Gove: The balance between the two is delicate. What we must do is recycle more.

Rebecca Pow (Taunton Deane) (Con): I commend the Government on banning microbeads, but may I urge them to now turn their attention to microfibres, Mr Speaker? I do not know whether Mrs Speaker does the washing, but every time we do a wash, 700,000 microfibres could go down the drain. I am joining the Women’s Institute to host an event on this in Parliament on 30 October; will the Minister join us?

Mr Speaker: I always feel better informed, and almost improved as a human being, when I hear the hon. Lady offer her disquisitions on these important matters.

Michael Gove: I should like to thank my hon. Friend, who was an excellent Parliamentary Private Secretary in our Department. She is now able to ask questions in the Chamber again. I have already met the WI to talk about this matter, and there are certain things that people can do, such as using fabric conditioner to reduce the amount of microfibres that get released from synthetic clothing. She will be aware that we are considering a number of issues, and that is why we have had a recent call for evidence on the impact of tyres and brakes, which are also a notable source of microfibres in our marine systems.

Stephen Gethins (North East Fife) (SNP): Regardless of our differences about our future relationship with the European Union, the Secretary of State and I will agree that a thriving food and drink sector is an endpoint that we want to get to at the end of whatever the negotiations will bring. Does he think that an extension to the transition period would be helpful in achieving that goal?

Michael Gove: I know that they talk of little else in Crail, Anstruther and Leuchars. The one thing I believe in is that it is vital that we leave the European Union at the earliest possible point so that we can ensure that we are outside the common agricultural policy and the common fisheries policy, and that we take back control
to ensure that Scotland’s food and drink manufacturers, along with food and drink manufacturers across the United Kingdom, can enjoy the benefits of being global Britain.

Several hon. Members rose—

Mr Speaker: It is very good to see the hon. Member for Dudley South (Mike Wood). I understand why he was delayed, but it is good to see him here in the Chamber.

Mike Wood (Dudley South) (Con): Thank you, Mr Speaker. We know that 82% of the beer that is drunk in our pubs is brewed in the UK. Jodie Kidd and other publicans will be presenting a 105,000-signature petition to Downing Street today to back the Long Live the Local campaign on beer duty. Will my right hon. Friend ensure that the Chancellor is fully aware of the contribution that our beer and pub sectors make to British farming, as well as to the wider economy and society?

Michael Gove: My hon. Friend does brilliant work as the chairman of the all-party beer group, and he is absolutely right to say that we must look at beer duty. In particular, a case has been forcefully made for looking at duty relief for small brewers in order to maximise growth in that sector, so that we can all enjoy great British beer.

Alison Thewliss (Glasgow Central) (SNP): The European Food Safety Authority currently sets standards and issues detailed guidance on the safety and composition of infant formula. Can the Minister tell me what is going to happen once we leave the EU?

Michael Gove: Yes: we will do considerably better.

Steve Double (St Austell and Newquay) (Con): Since Tuesday morning, a burst pipe has been spewing raw sewage into the sea near the UK’s premier surfing beach, Fistral, in Newquay. Despite taking some initial action, South West Water now says that it will take several days to resolve the issue. Does the Secretary of State share my concern that this is going on for so long, and what action can we take to hold water companies to account to prevent such things from happening?

Michael Gove: I absolutely am concerned, and I know that the Under-Secretary of State for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs, my hon. Friend the Member for Suffolk Coastal (Dr Coffey), will be talking to South West Water later today to see what can be done.

Several hon. Members rose—

Mr Speaker: We have just had a reference to water, so we have to hear from Ben Lake.

Ben Lake (Ceredigion) (PC): Will the independent review into the allocation of domestic farm support, which was announced this week by the Government, also consider processes by which future financial frameworks will be agreed? To that end, would the formation of a dedicated intergovernmental body be something that the Government could explore?

Michael Gove: The hon. Gentleman has made this point before, and it is a very fair one. I know that the Welsh Government have an opportunity to nominate a member of the panel, and I hope that that panel member will have an opportunity to talk to the hon. Gentleman about that matter.

David Duguid (Banff and Buchan) (Con): I welcome the Minister’s earlier comments about seasonal agricultural workers, but can he tell the House what discussions he has had with the Home Secretary on the future labour requirements of the seafood processing sector, and the food processing sector in general, particularly in areas of low unemployment such as the north-east of Scotland?

The Minister for Agriculture, Fisheries and Food (George Eustice): I am aware that the catching sector in Scotland has some particular issues around the maritime exemption and Filipino crews. That is something that colleagues in the Home Office are looking at. When it comes to the needs of the food industry more broadly, the report by the Migration Advisory Committee pointed out that existing EU citizens will be able to stay, and also that tier 5 youth mobility can be used in this case.

Mr Alistair Carmichael (Orkney and Shetland) (LD): On 20 March, at the Dispatch Box, the Secretary of State told us that “in December 2020 we will be negotiating fishing opportunities as a third country and independent coastal state”.—[Official Report, 20 March 2018; Vol. 638, c. 163.]

Given this morning’s comments by the Prime Minister and the Minister for the Cabinet Office about extending the transitional period, how confident is the Secretary of State now that he will be able to meet that undertaking?

Michael Gove: Invincibly so.

Stephen Crabb (Preseli Pembrokeshire) (Con): I was encouraged by my right hon. Friend’s reference to the small brewer relief scheme. Does he agree that it is one of the factors behind the amazing growth and success of the UK’s craft brewing sector, which includes such brilliant breweries as the Bluestone Brewing Company in my constituency?

Michael Gove: I know that brewery, not from having visited it, but from having sampled its products. It does amazing work, and my right hon. Friend is right to champion craft beer. Mr Speaker, I hope that you and I will have the opportunity to share some very soon.

Mr Speaker: Well, that sounds like an invitation that I cannot possibly resist.

Colleen Fletcher (Coventry North East) (Lab): Will the Secretary of State join me in congratulating the schoolchildren and adult volunteers who spent two days planting a new orchard at the Charterhouse, one of Coventry’s medieval buildings, as part of a larger restoration and renewal scheme? Does he agree that the orchard is a fantastic community initiative and, as part of the wider project, a great educational resource for my city?

Michael Gove: If I may say so, it is an exemplary use of parliamentary time to praise young people for doing the right thing, and I salute the hon. Lady for reminding us of what young people can do to inspire us about the future of nature.
Martin Vickers (Cleethorpes) (Con): The Secretary of State’s previous answer leads nicely into my question because he recently visited my constituency and met young Alfie Royston, who is doing so much to encourage other young people in the area to deal with the menace of plastic. Does he agree that we need to do more to harness the energy and enthusiasm of our young people in order to combat the problem?

Michael Gove: Young Alfie is an inspirational leader and voice for environmental improvement. His school, Tollbar Academy, is one of the best performing in the country. Both that school and that young man are lucky to have in my hon. Friend an effective champion and a brilliant constituency Member.

Jim McMahon (Oldham West and Royton) (Lab/Co-op): Every community has the right to a decent, clean and safe environment. Will the Secretary of State join me in congratulating the My Coldhurst Group and the Ghazali Trust on cleaning up their areas to make them safe for young people to play in?

Michael Gove: Absolutely. We all have a part to play, and I congratulate the hon. Gentleman. He had a distinguished track record in local government before coming to this place, and his leadership in this area is exemplary.

Mr Speaker: Thank you. Splendid.

CHURCH COMMISSIONERS

The right hon. Member for Meriden, representing the Church Commissioners, was asked—

Wonga Loan Book

1. Frank Field (Birkenhead) (Ind): What progress the Church of England has made on bringing together organisations and people of good will to buy the Wonga loan book.

Frank Field: I thank the right hon. Lady for that reply. With reference to the written answer she gave me about how the commissioners are using their huge portfolio of funds to push firms in the right direction, does she accept that the list of firms whose annual general meetings the commissioners turned up at to push social justice was short and rather disappointing? Will she meet me urgently to see how that programme can be extended?

Dame Caroline Spelman: I am happy to meet the right hon. Gentleman, and I would have been delighted to discuss his idea about the Wonga loan book before it was in the public domain. The Church of England paid close attention to his proposal and took the view that others are better placed to take the matter forward. However, going to AGMs is not the only intervention that Church Commissioners can make when trying to influence business and corporate policy in an ethical direction. That can also be done in writing and meetings do take place with a large number of companies.

Mr Philip Hollobone (Kettering) (Con): To reduce future reliance on loan companies such as Wonga, what is the Church of England doing to encourage personal financial education in its schools?

Dame Caroline Spelman: That is a good question. We obviously want to try to prevent the sort of situation that has arisen for Wonga’s customers. The Church of England’s primary focus is on tackling indebtedness in three ways: teaching children about financial literacy through the Just Finance Foundation, working to increase access to responsible credit, and supporting organisations such as Christians Against Poverty, which provides advice and debt counselling.

Diana Johnson (Kingston upon Hull North) (Lab): What else can be done to get more Church of England investment into ethical businesses? Could the Church play a hands-on role in assisting ethical businesses in some of our most disadvantaged communities?

Dame Caroline Spelman: The Church Commissioners are advised by the ethical investment advisory group and a very clear direction is given to asset managers about the sectors of the economy that the Church will not invest in on ethical grounds—for example, pornography and tobacco. The Church has recently played very close attention to the practice of the extractive industries and has had not a little success through its shareholder engagement in getting companies involved to change their policy towards tackling climate change.

Religious Freedom

2. Fiona Bruce (Congleton) (Con): What steps the Church of England is taking to promote religious freedom.

The Second Church Estates Commissioner (Dame Caroline Spelman): The Church of England welcomes the appointment of Lord Ahmad as the Prime Minister’s special envoy to promote religious freedom; the Church called for this and it fulfils a long-standing request from faith communities in this country. I look forward to working closely with him. Next month, the Church of England plans to convene a reference group between its bishops and staff, the legal profession, theologians, ethicists and academics to explore the issues of religious freedom.

Fiona Bruce: Will my right hon. Friend join me in welcoming the recent landmark unanimous judgment of the Supreme Court in the case of Lee v. Ashers Baking Company Ltd and others and the religious
freedom it has confirmed for Christians here in the UK not to be coerced into expressing views contrary to their sincerely held biblical beliefs?

**Dame Caroline Spelman:** Whatever one’s views on marriage, everyone should be equal before the law and, of course, I would argue, equal in God’s sight. The Church of England agrees that no one should suffer discrimination in the provision of goods and services on the grounds of age, race, gender, sexuality or any other personal characteristic. I think that it is striking that the Supreme Court found that there was no discrimination in this case, but instead found that the key issue was the right to freedom of expression.

**Dr David Drew** (Stroud) (Lab/Co-op): What additional measures does the Church intend to try to put in place to make sure that everyone has the opportunity to visit a place of worship on their preferred day?

**Dame Caroline Spelman:** It may be of interest to the hon. Gentleman to know that yesterday the Archbishop of Canterbury made a speech in the House of Lords about religious tolerance. The Church has consistently made the case that people should be able to worship unimpeded in this country according to their faith. The Archbishop said something very telling; he said that society needs to learn how to disagree well and that we need a society where rich beliefs and traditions can rub up against each other and against secular ideology in mutual challenge and respect.

**Jeremy Lefroy** (Stafford) (Con): What work is the Church of England doing with other Christian Churches and other faiths—with Muslims, Hindus, Buddhists and so on—to stand united on behalf of religious freedom around the world and against the persecution of religious minorities in every country, whatever the majority faith? I have to say with great sadness that Christians are the most persecuted minorities around the world.

**Dame Caroline Spelman:** As hon. Members will know from this Question Time, the Anglican Church around the world regularly speaks up on behalf of persecuted Christians. I regularly take questions from hon. Members about countries in which persecution is an issue. Last Saturday, the Archbishop of Canterbury was invited to speak in Nigeria ahead of the elections there to call for peace. He never misses an opportunity to make the case for persecuted Christians around the world.

**Jim Shannon** (Strangford) (DUP): As the right hon. Lady knows, people of all faiths and none across the world are subject to persecution for their religion or beliefs. Can she share with the House what the Church of England is doing to support the welfare of non-Christian communities around the world and to advocate for their right to freedom of religion or belief?

**Dame Caroline Spelman:** I think that particularly in the middle east, where Christians are often a persecuted minority, we speak up regularly about their plight. The Anglican Church also speaks out on the persecution of other denominations. The campaign that Christians have supported for the better protection of the Yazidi minority is just one example in that region of how we must be prepared to speak up for others.

**Luke Pollard** (Plymouth, Sutton and Devonport) (Lab/Co-op): The recently published commission on religious education set out a framework for updating RE and teaching the importance of religious freedoms. What steps is the Church of England taking to implement its findings?

**Dame Caroline Spelman:** The Church is very supportive of improved religious literacy in our schools. If ever there was a time to understand better the world we live in, it is now. This is the time when we need to equip our children, whatever their faith or background, to better understand what sometimes underpins the conflicts that exist around the world. So this is a timely intervention and I am pleased we have moved away from a now rather old-fashioned view that, if we just stamped out the teaching of religion, everything would be fine—nothing could be further from the truth.

**House of Commons Commission**

The right hon. Member for Carshalton and Wallington, representing the House of Commons Commission, was asked—

Northern Estate Programme

3. **Christian Matheson** (City of Chester) (Lab): What recent progress has been made on the Northern Estate programme.

**Sir Paul Beresford** (Mole Valley): Work has started on changes to Commissioner’s Yard Gate, where an additional secure vehicle access point for deliveries and construction traffic is being constructed. Planning approval and listed building consent have been obtained for preparatory work on 1 Derby Gate. This building will be refurbished and adapted to make it suitable to be used for accommodation for Members, and I believe work will start around the end of this month, when the last occupants are moved out.

**Christian Matheson:** We missed an opportunity with the refurbishment of the Elizabeth Tower, when the work was given to a known blacklisting company. May I therefore ask the hon. Gentleman and the House of Commons Commission whether consideration will be given in the contracts being drawn up for the Northern Estate project to ensuring that companies that are unrepentant blacklists are not allowed to do work on this site?

**Sir Paul Beresford:** I think we will continue with the procedures we have used before and pick the suitable candidate to do the suitable work on the basis of a number of measures.

**David Linden** (Glasgow East) (SNP): I know from speaking to a number of parliamentary colleagues that certain aspects of the estate, including the Northern
Estate, are not great for people with disabilities. What work is being done to make sure this place is more accessible, particularly for colleagues who have a disability?

Sir Paul Beresford: Sorry—this must be something to do with my antipodean background—but could the hon. Gentleman please repeat the question, because I did not follow it?

David Linden: I am very popular today. I was saying that a number of parliamentary colleagues who have disabilities find it difficult getting around certain parts of the estate. Given that we are doing this refurbishment work, what can be done to make sure that those with a disability are able to move around more freely and that this place is accessible?

Sir Paul Beresford: Sorry, but could the hon. Gentleman please do it very slowly, in an antipodean English?

Mr Deputy Speaker (Sir Lindsay Hoyle): I think the answer might be that the hon. Gentleman could reply in writing, when he reads the record.

Chris Elmore (Ogmore) (Lab): I will try to get this on the first go—

Melanie Onn (Great Grimsby) (Lab): Oh no, you’re Welsh! [Laughter.]

Chris Elmore: I am Welsh, so God help the hon. Gentleman. Will he confirm that, as part of the Northern Estate refurbishments, he will be doing his utmost, as will the commission, to make sure that we use local procurement, find as much of the workforce as we can from within the United Kingdom and make sure that where there are skills gaps we work with the further and higher education sector to find training for local employees and groups?

Sir Paul Beresford: That makes eminent sense to me. I know one of the firms particularly well and it is using that approach, particularly for training, including of apprentices, so that we can benefit as a community as well.

PUBLIC ACCOUNTS COMMISSION

The hon. Member for Gainsborough, the Chairman of the Public Accounts Commission, was asked—

Leaving the EU: National Audit Office

4. Martin Vickers (Cleethorpes) (Con): What recent discussions he has had with the National Audit Office on the potential effect on its work of the UK leaving the EU.

Sir Edward Leigh (Gainsborough): Brexit is a major task for Departments, and over the past 18 months the NAO has produced 15 reports looking at aspects of Brexit. Recent NAO work has provided evaluations of progress at the Department for Transport and the Department for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs. In the coming years, the NAO will continue to scrutinise the work of Departments as they implement Brexit. The UK’s exiting the EU has also led to new financial audit work, not least the audits of the Department for Exiting the European Union and the Department for International Trade. The NAO currently undertakes audit work on the UK’s administration of funds paid under the European common agricultural policy. That work will end after the UK leaves the EU.

Martin Vickers: I thank my hon. Friend for his comprehensive answer. I know he shares my view that the sooner we leave the EU, the better and that a longer transition is totally unacceptable. Does he agree that it is important that the NAO is able to work with similar bodies, both in the EU and outside it, post Brexit?

Sir Edward Leigh: In this job, I shall not be tempted down the path of transition, but I can confirm that the NAO will be just as free to share good practice and will continue to compare notes with both European and international audit bodies. The NAO is an active member of the International Organisation of Supreme Audit Institutions, which promotes good practice among Government auditors worldwide, and it is also part of a European regional group of supreme audit institutes. Those strong professional links will not be affected by Brexit, so that is another small plank of “Project Fear” done away with.

CHURCH COMMISSIONERS

The right hon. Member for Meriden, representing the Church Commissioners, was asked—

Churchyards: Community Use

5. Kevin Foster (Torbay) (Con): What plans the Church of England has to encourage more community use of churchyards.

The Second Church Estates Commissioner (Dame Caroline Spelman): This year, the Church Urban Fund showed that mental health and loneliness are a growing issue in our local communities. Parishes are being encouraged to use their churchyards and green spaces to support community gardening projects to promote wellbeing, caring for their community’s mind, body and spirit. The Church of England is working with the Church Times, the Guild of Health and St Raphael, and the Conservation Foundation to launch the Green Health awards to showcase best practice.

Kevin Foster: I thank my right hon. Friend for her answer. Paignton churchyard is one of the most historic and beautiful places in Torbay, yet the cost of maintaining safe access to it for the community can end up falling on the congregation. What support does the Church of England offer to its local parishes to ensure that they can maintain and enhance access to such special places?

Dame Caroline Spelman: In respect of where the responsibility for safe access lies, there is a distinction between churchyards that remain open for use, which are the Church of England’s responsibility, and those that are now full, for which the responsibility shifts to local government. In the case my hon. Friend raises, the Church of England would be very supportive if it is still an active churchyard, so to speak.
I am delighted to say that in my hon. Friend’s diocese there are two Green Health award nominees: St Sidwell’s church in Exeter and All Saints in Okehampton. I encourage him to look at other churches in this constituency that might be candidates for such awards.

**HOUSE OF COMMONS COMMISSION**

_The right hon. Member for Carshalton and Wallington, representing the House of Commons Commission, was asked—_

**Emergency Childcare Provision**

6. **Meg Hillier** (Hackney South and Shoreditch) (Lab/Co-op): What estimate has the Commission made of the cost to the public purse of emergency childcare provision for Members and House staff?  [907128]

**Sir Paul Beresford** (Mole Valley): It costs some £54,000 annually.

**Meg Hillier:** The measure to introduce emergency childcare fills me with some nervousness. If Officers of the House or, indeed, Members need emergency support, we should be inculcating a culture of providing those Officers of the House with time off to deal with their children, rather than encouraging them to buy in childcare when that may not be the right thing to do. In addition to the costs, how many Members or members of the House staff have availed themselves of and drawn down this emergency childcare provision?

**Sir Paul Beresford:** My cynicism matches the hon. Lady’s cynicism, but it is a trial. I shall write to her with the actual figures because I was not able to get them, although I was staggered to find out that the service gives parents in the House the opportunity to access 1,450 nurseries, 2,900 child minders, 1,000 holiday clubs and hundreds of nannies. As a parent, which the hon. Lady is, she will realise that sometimes everything goes wrong with childcare and, going by my experience with my children, who are now grown up, it is always at the last, disastrous minute.

**ELECTORAL COMMISSION COMMITTEE**

_The hon. Member for Houghton and Sunderland South, representing the Speaker’s Committee on the Electoral Commission, was asked—_

**Breaches of Electoral Rules: Fines**

8. **Alan Brown** (Kilmarnock and Loudoun) (SNP): What recent discussions she has had with the Minister for the Cabinet Office on the potential merits of increasing electoral fines for breaches of electoral rules.  [907130]

**Bridget Phillipson** (Houghton and Sunderland South): The Electoral Commission has ongoing dialogue with the Minister for the Constitution and has raised the issue of the cap on its ability to levy proportionate fines. The commission would like its maximum fine to be increased to a level that provides a genuine deterrent to campaigners who may be tempted to break the UK’s political finance laws.

**Alan Brown:** I thank the hon. Lady for that answer and welcome that response. The Scottish National party is the only major party never to have been fined. As the hon. Lady pointed out, the Electoral Commission has complained that the fines issued to other parties did not match their crimes. Yesterday, my hon. Friend the Member for Perth and North Perthshire (Pete Wishart) asked the Prime Minister about the clear breaches of electoral law in the EU referendum. When does the Committee expect tougher legislation to be introduced to prevent the Vote Leave-type of misconduct from happening again?

**Bridget Phillipson:** The hon. Gentleman is right to highlight the fact that the commission has repeatedly warned that the ability to fine campaigners a maximum of only £20,000 per offence could increasingly become seen as the cost of doing business for well-resourced political parties and campaigners. The Minister for the Constitution wrote to the commission in response to its recent report on digital campaigning and said that the Government would carefully consider the recommendation. The commission continues to urge the Government to introduce legislation to strengthen its sanctioning powers for future elections and referendums.

**Wayne David** (Caerphilly) (Lab): Last year, figures from the Electoral Commission showed that there were very few cases, or indeed allegations, of electoral fraud. Does that not demonstrate that the perception of electoral fraud is far, far greater than the actuality of electoral fraud?

**Bridget Phillipson:** My hon. Friend makes an important point. No one wants to see barriers put in place to participating in elections and referendums. The commission has been involved in looking at the pilots that were undertaken around voter ID in recent elections and it will continue to make recommendations to Government to make sure that all people are able to take part in elections.

**Sir Mike Penning** (Hemel Hempstead) (Con): My constituents have asked me who the Electoral Commission is accountable to, because it seems to have completely ignored my constituents in the recent consultation on boundary changes.

**Bridget Phillipson:** Through the Speaker’s Committee on the Electoral Commission, the Electoral Commission reports to this House. I am sure that the commission will be happy to meet the right hon. Gentleman to discuss any concerns that he or his constituents may have on any issues of electoral law, but issues around boundaries are not within the remit of the Electoral Commission.

**Alison Thewliss** (Glasgow Central) (SNP): The instances of alleged frauds around Vote Leave are very high profile, but what more can be done to target local government elections, where often it feels on the ground that the spending limits are being breached and nobody is challenging this to ensure the integrity of local elections?
Bridget Phillipson: I am grateful to the hon. Lady for her question. There will be occasions where such matters are a matter for the relevant police force. I am sure that the commission would encourage anyone with evidence of misconduct or breaches of electoral law to make that report to the relevant authority. I am also sure that the commission would be happy to discuss any concern that she might have directly with her.

CHURCH COMMISSIONERS

The right hon. Member for Meriden, representing the Church Commissioners, was asked—

First World War Centenary

9. Alex Burghart (Brentwood and Ongar) (Con): What plans the Church of England has to commemorate the centenary of the end of the first world war. [907131]

The Second Church Estates Commissioner (Dame Caroline Spelman): This, I think, will be the last set of questions before we reach 11 November, which will be the culmination of four years of the Church of England marking the centenary of world war one. On that day, we will be encouraging parishes to ring their bells and commemorate bells and to commemorate every name on the war memorial. The Church has been distributing national resources to every parish with suggested liturgies, and also supporting the “Ringing Remembers” bell-ringing campaign. At an earlier Question Time, I mentioned that even hon. Members might like to consider becoming a bell ringer to mark such an auspicious occasion.

Alex Burghart: I thank my right hon. Friend for that response. I grew up with my great grandmother, who lived through the first world war, and I knew some of her friends who were widowed in it and some of her friends who never married because of it. Will she ask the Church of England to remember the home front in its thanksgiving services?

Dame Caroline Spelman: The home front was a very important part of the great war and we should remember, as we do, not just the lives laid down in conflict but the sacrifices made by so many. May I use this opportunity to remind hon. Members present that the Parliament choir will be singing jointly with the choir of the German Parliament in the event to mark the centenary of the Armistice on the evening of Wednesday 31 October? As I understand it, every seat in Westminster Hall has now been sold, but there is always an opportunity for returns, if hon. Members have not thought to come to that event. I think and hope that it will be a very special occasion.

Bob Blackman (Harrow East) (Con): Soldiers of all faiths and of no faith came together to help us in the great war. What plans does the Church have to include all faiths in this commemoration, so that we can bring people together?

Dame Caroline Spelman: The resources I referred to on the Church website to assist parishes in preparing for the marking of the Armistice include a really interesting monologue entitled, “Steps towards Reconciliation”, which looks at ways to bring people of very different backgrounds together. The Archbishop of Canterbury supported the call by the former Chief Rabbi, Jonathan Sacks, that all faiths be represented at the Cenotaph to show, in an act of solidarity, that people of all faiths and of none will never forget the sacrifice that was made to keep us free.
Employment and Support Allowance

Underpayments

10.39 am

Marsha De Cordova (Battersea) (Lab) (Urgent Question): To ask the Secretary of State for Work and Pensions if she will make a statement on the updated figures on the employment and support allowance underpayments.

The Minister for Disabled People, Health and Work (Sarah Newton): The Department is correcting some historical underpayments of ESA that arose while migrating people from incapacity benefit to employment and support allowance. We realise how important it is to get this matter fixed. The mistakes clearly should not have happened and it is vital that the situation is sorted as quickly as possible.

For the initial stage of the exercise, we expect to review around 320,000 cases, of which around 105,000 are likely to be due arrears. We now have a team of more than 400 staff working through these cases and have paid around £120 million of arrears. We expect to complete the vast majority of this part of the exercise by April 2019, and we have to date completed all cases where an individual is terminally ill and has responded to the review, thereby ensuring that they receive due priority. The additional cases will be undertaken throughout the course of 2019.

The announcement in July to pay cases back to the point of conversion requires us to review an additional 250,000 cases, of which we estimate around 75,000 could be due arrears. We will undertake this work throughout the course of 2019. An additional 400 members of staff will be joining the team throughout this month and November, and we will be assigning further staff throughout the review of the 250,000 cases. That will enable us to complete this very important activity at pace.

The Department has prioritised checking the claims of individuals who, from our systems, we know to be terminally ill. To date, we have completed all cases from the initial 320,000. Where an individual is terminally ill and has responded to the review, we want to ensure that they get that money as soon as possible. We are therefore now contacting cases identified as most likely to have been underpaid according to our systems. Some of those cases will undoubtedly be the most complex ones.

The Department yesterday published an ad hoc statistical publication, setting out further detail on the progress we have made in processing cases, and revised estimates of the impacts of the exercise, including details on the number of claimants due arrears and the amounts likely to be paid. Yesterday, I also updated the frequently asked questions guide and deposited it in the Library, and I will continue to update the House.

Marsha De Cordova: I thank Mr Speaker for granting this urgent question.

Yesterday, it emerged that up to 180,000 ill and disabled people have been underpaid vital social security dating back to 2011. In July this year, the Government initially estimated that 70,000 ill and disabled people were underpaid, but it is now clear that more than double that amount were underpaid £5,000 on average, after having been wrongly migrated from incapacity benefit to contributions-based ESA, thereby denying them the additional social security support payments such as the severe disability premium. It has taken the Government six years to acknowledge these mistakes and seven years to find out how many disabled people have actually been affected. Some disabled people will wait 10 years to receive back payments.

The Department for Work and Pensions now estimates that it will pay up to £1 billion as a result of this shambolic error, so will the Minister tell us what mechanisms the Department has in place to ensure that the timeline for repayment is followed? Will she ensure that she will keep this House updated? Will her Department pay compensation to those who have been pushed into rent arrears, debt and destitution? What support will the Department provide to the estates of the ill and disabled people who have tragically passed away before receiving their back payment? How much of the Government’s total expenditure on social security is spent on underpayments, and what actions are the Government taking to put this right? Given the scale of the error made transferring people to ESA, how can the Government ensure that they will get it right when transferring up to 1 million disabled people on to universal credit? Perhaps the most important question is this: will the Minister apologise to the almost 200,000 disabled people and their families who have been denied vital social security support?

Sarah Newton: We first came to the House to talk about this issue last December, and we have regularly updated the House since. I myself have already apologised. Clearly, this was a dreadful administrative error in the Department and should not have happened. The permanent secretary has also apologised to the Public Accounts Committee and the National Audit Office for the administrative mistakes.

It is important to recognise that, when people were transferring across from IB to ESA, a very paternalistic approach was taken, meaning the claimant was not involved in the transfer at all. All the funding they were receiving from the Department was transferred across, so nobody had anything taken away from them; rather, people missed the opportunity to receive additional support by way of an additional premium. We are now making sure, by reviewing these cases, that people get everything they are entitled to, because it is important that our benefits system benefits those who are entitled to it.

The hon. Lady raises important questions about what we have learned. We have learned a great deal from this exercise. As we have regularly told the House and Select Committees—the permanent secretary was before the Work and Pensions Select Committee only yesterday answering questions—the culture and mechanisms in the Department for spotting errors have been fundamentally reviewed. As we have discussed at length, this is a matter of public record—people in the Department and stakeholders came forward and pointed out some of the problems with the migration, but the Department responded in the belief that they were a series of one-off errors.

By 2014, it was recognised that some people were not being migrated accurately, and guidance was put in place. These were administrative errors that occurred in the Department, and officials took the appropriate action to the best of their ability. In fact, it was thanks to the good housekeeping of the DWP that the scale of...
the error was spotted. It was during the routine work undertaken on fraud and error that it was detected. At that point, Ministers were told, and they then undertook the administrative exercises that have led to the situation today.

As the Minister responsible now, I am looking towards the next huge migration of people—from ESA to universal credit—and the Secretary of State has made it absolutely clear that we will take an extremely careful test-and-learn approach and make sure that this time we involve the claimant in the migration. That is how we will avoid the situation reoccurring.

Sir Mike Penning (Hemel Hempstead) (Con): The Minister has rightly apologised, and I, too, apologise, because I was the responsible Minister during part of the migration. Mistakes happen in all Governments—they happened during the 13 years Labour was in government and before that when we were in government. The question is how we handle it. In a Department with a budget in excess of £250 billion a year, mistakes will be made, but will the Minister make sure, where compensation payments are required—because there will be people who have suffered—that we admit it and address it, rather than taking a partisan attitude, which I am sorry to say we have heard here today? Mistakes were made before, and mistakes have been made now. We have to address that today.

Sarah Newton: I appreciate what my right hon. Friend says. As I have made clear from the start, and as is completely supported by the Secretary of State, my focus is to fix the problem as soon as possible. We have put in considerable additional resource to make sure people get back payments as soon as possible. As far as possible, we are reaching out and getting the money to those who will most benefit from it.

I also want to reassure the House that the families of people who would have benefited from this additional payment and who tragically have died are being contacted. We are trying to find their families so that they can have that money.

Then there is the whole issue of whether people have missed out on passported benefits. I think that is the point that my right hon. Friend was raising. Each passported benefit is the responsibility of the Government Department concerned, and it would be very impractical for us to find out whether people accessed particular schemes. For example, the Department of Health, as we all know, has a low-income prescription scheme that some people might have accessed and some might not have done. We are going through the process of, wherever possible, making sure that people get the money that they should have as soon as possible. We have ongoing discussions with the other Departments that have passported benefits to make sure that people on low incomes get those benefits.

David Linden (Glasgow East) (SNP): It is absolutely staggering that this error has happened on the DWP’s part. The fact that it was allowed to happen over so many years should be shocking, but actually it is not, because I and many of my colleagues see, week in, week out—every single week—the absolute iniquity of the Department for Work and Pensions. I have a lot of respect for the Minister, but to suggest that this was somehow due to a housekeeping issue on the part of the DWP really is laughable, because it has been an absolutely unacceptable situation.

Will the DWP be undertaking investigations to find out what impact having less money has had on these people? How many of them were forced into poverty, and how many had to use food banks? How many suffered physically or emotionally as a result of this catastrophic error, and was their condition impacted? What investigations are the Department undertaking to ensure that similar errors have not been repeated? How is the Minister strengthening the Department’s internal mechanisms to ensure that these errors can be rectified more quickly in future?

Sarah Newton: The permanent secretary has been discussing with the Public Accounts Committee and the National Audit Office the very substance of the hon. Gentleman’s question about strengthening procedures within the Department to make sure that this does not happen again. The National Audit Office made a series of recommendations to the Department about strengthening procedures within the Department which the permanent secretary has accepted and which are now in place. For example, if members of staff or stakeholders raise concerns about something going wrong or some unintended consequences with regard to the administration of benefits, they are referred to a committee in the Department and those matters are properly considered. We have much wider and deeper stakeholder engagement. It is particularly important now, as we move forward in designing the new benefit of universal credit, that stakeholders work with disabled people themselves—who are obviously experts on their own condition—and with us to shape those processes to make sure that we absolutely get them right. I am absolutely determined to make sure that that is the case.

Alex Burghart (Brentwood and Ongar) (Con): I welcome the Minister’s apology and the comments she has made about system learning—that is extremely important. How long does she envisage it will take before everyone affected is repaid the money they are owed?

Sarah Newton: We are working as fast as we possibly can, and we confidently expect everyone to be paid by the end of next year. As I say, we prioritised the people who we think are most likely to have been affected by the underpayments so that they can have their money fastest. We have regularly updated the House. We released the statistics yesterday so that the House could be fully apprised of the situation, and I will continue to do that.

Ruth George (High Peak) (Lab): I apologise, Mr Deputy Speaker, for having to head off to the Select Committee meeting in a moment.

Will the Minister confirm how much of the £1 billion underpayment now being cited is due to payments made before October 2014, thanks to the Child Poverty Action Group’s successful court action, and thanks only to that? When Her Majesty’s Revenue and Customs makes someone overpay tax going back years due to official error, they are paid interest and often compensation. Will the Minister confirm that these ESA recipients, who are often in a much worse position than taxpayers, will receive similar interest payments backdated to when their payments should have been made?
Sarah Newton: I thank the hon. Lady for that question. I know that she does fantastic work on the Work and Pensions Committee, and no doubt we will discuss this further at the Committee.

Let us be really clear about what happened. The advice that the Department got was that section 27 of the Social Security Act 1998 applied. That was why we felt we had to make the decision to back-pay to 2014. When additional information came forward from the National Audit Office and the Child Poverty Action Group about official error, the Secretary of State took the decision that, of course, we must do what the law says and go right back to the point of conversion. It was not in any way that the Government were trying not to do the right thing. We have proactively been utterly transparent and open with the House about this error, and we want to fix it as soon as possible.

The hon. Lady asked about the two phases. The first group of people that we are looking at date back to pre-2014 and the second group are from 2014. We have started to make payments to both groups of people, and so far we have paid out £420 million to the pre-2014 group.1

Bob Blackman (Harrow East) (Con): We are talking about some of the most vulnerable people in society, who will be assisted by either carers or charities. Can my hon. Friend update the House on what assistance is being given to carers and charities? Is there a helpline or somewhere that people who may not be contacted by the Department can seek help and assistance?

Sarah Newton: My hon. Friend is a doughty champion for the most disadvantaged people in society, so I would expect no less a question from him. To reassure him, I visited the main centre in Oldham where we are contacting people who we feel may have been affected and then beginning to collect information, so that we can ensure that we pay them what they are owed. We are being very careful to ensure that we send letters, and in the letter there is information about a helpline that people can call.

We are very happy to speak to people’s carers. As my hon. Friend says, some people with severe disabilities may not be able to engage with us, and people with mental health conditions may be anxious and not want to engage with us. I was incredibly impressed by the care, compassion and professionalism of my colleagues in the Department for Work and Pensions in Oldham who are undertaking this very important exercise.

Stephen Timms (East Ham) (Lab): The National Audit Office did not find the Department to be transparent when it was raising concerns about this; it found it to be defensive. Unfortunately, that has characterised the Department for a number of years around universal credit, as the NAO has pointed out in the past. With this much bigger transfer ahead, which the Minister mentioned, are there any proposals to change the culture of the Department and to be more open when problems of this kind are raised?

Sarah Newton: I am grateful for the right hon. Gentleman’s question, and I deeply respect the work that he has done throughout his time in Parliament to stand up for the most vulnerable people in our society. I can reassure him that we are learning a lot of lessons from what happened when we migrated people from incapacity benefit to ESA. I think he was in the House when the Labour party created the work capability assessment and ESA. We have been working very hard to improve that benefit and to ensure that we learn lessons.

These problems arose because of the way that the migration was handled, and I am determined to ensure that when we go forward into UC, claimants are involved, to ensure that they are not missing out on any of the benefits to which they are entitled. We are working very closely with disabled people, people with health conditions, charities, citizens advice bureaux and disability rights organisations to ensure that we get that process absolutely right.

Tom Pursglove (Corby) (Con): Can my hon. Friend confirm how those affected will be communicated with and how quickly? Is appropriate guidance and advice being cascaded to commonly used community advice services?

Sarah Newton: Once we scan the cases of those who have been underpaid to see who is most likely to benefit, we write to them and give them a telephone number so that we can work with them to complete their form as quickly as possible. We of course very much welcome the support that people get from carers and other professionals to do that. There is a telephone line, and we do work very carefully and considerably to make sure that people can work with us as easily as possible.

Thangam Debbonaire (Bristol West) (Lab): My constituent L has been without ESA since September 2017 and has been surviving on personal independence payments. After lodging an appeal with a sick note, he should have been put on the appeal payments rate, but he was not, despite the intervention of his support worker, until I intervened, which is not satisfactory. He is now receiving the appeal rate, but even if his appeal was successful today, he would be owed over £4,000—money he needs—and he still has no appeal date. I know the DWP staff are doing their best, but they have told my staff that L has slipped through the net. Is the system not supposed to be the net? Does the Minister think this is acceptable?

Sarah Newton: I clearly do not think that that case is acceptable at all. Clearly, there was a mistake there. I am pleased that the hon. Lady has been able to intervene and that the gentleman is now getting the benefit to which he is entitled. We are always working to improve our processes and our systems.

Philip Davies (Shipley) (Con): May I commend the Minister, who is a decent person? She is an excellent Minister, and she is doing a great job of dealing with an issue that predates her period as a Minister by an awful long time. She should be commended for the work she is doing in trying to put this matter right. That is in stark contrast, I might say, to the Labour party.

My hon. Friend the Minister will recall the scandal of tax credits, when half the people were paid incorrectly—some underpaid, some overpaid and millions paid the wrong amount—and those people are still, in many

Sarah Newton: I thank my hon. Friend for his kind words. It is an honour and a privilege to have this job, and I am absolutely determined that we will do everything we can to make sure that people get the back payments they rightly deserve. He makes a very good point about the absolute devastation that tax credits caused to so many people’s lives, and he is quite right to remind us of that. I want to point out that when people were transferred from IB to ESA, nobody had a loss of income. What we are talking about is money to which they might have been eligible at the time but did not get at the time, but everybody transferred across on the benefit they had.

Ian Mearns (Gateshead) (Lab): I say to the hon. Member for Shipley (Philip Davies) that I am sorry, but two wrongs do not make a right, and his party has been in government for eight years—I repeat, eight years—now.

This involves hundreds of thousands of the most vulnerable people in our society, which I am afraid to say makes me angry and very sad. Given the time that has elapsed since this came to light, some if not many of the individuals who are known to be terminally ill will, sadly, have died. Their loved ones will have lost a loved and treasured family member in the knowledge that they had to endure increased hardship due to wrongly withheld benefits. What are Ministers doing to console those families and to compensate them for their loss?

Sarah Newton: I absolutely agree with the hon. Gentleman that these are some of the most vulnerable people in society. That is why we have put in place everything that we can to reach out to them and make sure that they get the benefits they absolutely deserve to have, and where people, tragically, have passed away, that their families receive those benefits. I have apologised, the Secretary of State has apologised and the permanent secretary has apologised. This mistake should not have happened, and we are absolutely determined to sort it out as swiftly as we possibly can.

Stephen Doughty (Cardiff South and Penarth) (Lab/Co-op): I am afraid that the Minister coming to the Chamber and praising the Department for good housekeeping is extremely ill-judged and inappropriate in such a serious situation. Of course, this is just the tip of the iceberg. I have had vulnerable constituents waiting for up to a year, and receiving reduced payments or nothing at all. Before this scandal even came out, one of my constituents had to be paid £2,000 backdated, but only—like my colleague, my hon. Friend the Member for Bristol West (Thangam Debbonaire)—after my and my team’s intervention. Will the Minister tell us how many claims are allowed following an appeal, and how long is the current waiting time for those appeals?

Sarah Newton: The hon. Gentleman is now bringing up cases of people who applied for ESA more recently—I think that is what he is talking about—which is different from the people who were migrated across from incapacity benefit to ESA. Clearly, it is really important that we get the decision right first time for everyone. That is what we absolutely want to do: make sure that people applying for ESA are treated with respect and dignity, and get the right result.

I always look at the claimant experience, because behind every statistic is a real live person. The independent data shows that, when asked how they experienced the work capability assessment, over 90% of ESA claimants are satisfied. Obviously, some people, about 9% of people who apply for ESA, take their cases to appeal because they are not satisfied with the results. About 4% of those cases are upheld. Often, that is a case of more medical information being brought forward. I do not want there to be any appeals; I want to make sure we make the decisions right first time. That is why we put in place independent reviews and put in a huge amount of work to improve the work capability assessment and improve the benefit. [Interruption.] From a sedentary position, people are shouting out, “How long is the waiting time for appeals?” [Interruption.] I think the custom in the House is that Members rise to their feet to ask a question. [Interruption.]

Mr Deputy Speaker (Sir Lindsay Hoyle): Order. Lots of Members want to get in. We need short and accurate answers.

Sarah Newton: I want to come on to answer the question about the waiting time for appeals. That is the responsibility of the Ministry of Justice. I am working very carefully with the MOJ to reduce the amount of time people have to wait for appeals. It is coming down. In the last set of statistics I saw, it had come down by 9%. Over 200 judges have been recruited to the tribunal service, so we can see improvements—

Mr Deputy Speaker: Order. Can I just say that it is not fair to keep going? I am sure there will be a written question to which there will definitely be an answer.

Deidre Brock (Edinburgh North and Leith) (SNP): Will the Minister confirm that the money will not come from existing budgets? Will she also make representations to the Chancellor to ensure the extra spending will not impact on additional spending urgently needed in other areas, such as universal credit?

Sarah Newton: I very much want to confirm that there is no impact on any of our existing benefits claimants. For anybody who is on benefits now, their money is not impacted by this whatsoever. We are absolutely making sure we have the right resources, both in staff and in paying out these benefits. It will not have an adverse effect on existing claimants.

Diana Johnson (Kingston upon Hull North) (Lab): Due to the serious nature of this issue, I am surprised that there has had to be an urgent question, not a ministerial statement. I am also disappointed that the Secretary of State is not here, because of the seriousness of the situation. Thirdly, I am very disappointed that the Minister is talking about action at pace, when it seems that it will be months and months and months ahead before this will be resolved. My question is this:
what is the impact of disability premiums on tax credits? Will they also be repaid by Her Majesty’s Revenue and Customs?

Sarah Newton: Let us be clear: the Secretary of State came to the House last December and we have made a series of statements. Just yesterday, there was a written statement. We have put out information. The choice of urgent questions is a matter for Mr Speaker; it is not a matter for us. We have regularly updated the House with written ministerial statements. We had oral questions on Monday; so there was the opportunity for Opposition Members to raise these questions then. There was an opportunity again during yesterday’s debate. We are regularly in this House. We are absolutely accountable to Parliament and will continue to update the House regularly.

Fiona Onasanya (Peterborough) (Lab): For the record, as stats were published yesterday, this could not have been raised on Monday. The Secretary of State advised that the disabled would be better off under universal credit. Where can those calculations be found? Other statistics have shown that the disabled will be worse off—this affects 750,000 people. Furthermore, constituents have written to me regarding work capability assessments and feel that leading questions have been asked and wrong decisions made on claims. However, the Minister said that on ESA, the Government have tightened what they are doing now, things have been looked into and they are trying to make it more streamlined and more consistent. On the question asked by my right hon. Friend the Member for East Ham (Stephen Timms), I would like to know what safeguards are in place to ensure that vulnerable people are protected and assessments are fair.

Sarah Newton: The work capability assessment was at the heart of the hon. Lady’s question, and it has been the subject of consultations and huge amounts of stakeholder engagement. We are absolutely determined to continuously improve the work capability assessment. Healthcare professionals who undertake the assessments are all medically qualified and they are all trained. We have a huge amount of stakeholder engagement working with us constantly to improve the work capability assessment and in fact, the whole claimant journey through ESA.

Mr Deputy Speaker (Sir Lindsay Hoyle): I call Melanie Onn.

Melanie Onn (Great Grimsby) (Lab): Thank you very much, Mr Deputy Speaker; that was unexpected—I thought I was in trouble.

I have to say, I am a little disappointed with the Minister. This is such a sensitive and incredibly important issue; a little more contrition at the Dispatch Box really would not have gone amiss. I am pleased, however, about the Department’s acceptance that where there are errors on its part, back-payments will be made. In that spirit—of accepting the principle of back-payments when errors are made—may I ask whether this will require primary legislation? I asked about kinship carers when errors are made—may I ask whether this will spirit—of accepting the principle of back-payments issue; a little more contrition at the Dispatch Box really thought I was in trouble.

The hon. Lady has raised a specific case that I am not familiar with, so the best thing to do is for me to write to her on that specific case, because I do not want to mislead the House in any way.

Alison Thewliss (Glasgow Central) (SNP): A constituent of mine, a young woman with fibromyalgia, had her ESA stopped and was told by the DWP to move over on to universal credit while waiting for a mandatory reconsideration. My understanding is that if she had done so, she would not be able to move back on to ESA even if the mandatory reconsideration was successful. How are people being tracked through this labyrinthine system and how certain is the Minister that everybody will get back-payments who is entitled to them, particularly if they have moved from one benefit to another over this period?

Sarah Newton: It is always very difficult to comment without the full details of the specific case. As the hon. Lady knows, I am always happy to meet Members of the House and go through particular cases. If I may talk in general terms, ESA within UC is the same: people apply, they have a work capability assessment and they are assessed. I reassure her that the process is the same and that if the Department makes mistakes, we do back-pay, as we have heard today. But let us meet on that specific case, so that I can give her the best possible advice for her constituent.

Chris Elmore (Ogmore) (Lab): The Minister’s apology is welcome, but it brings little comfort, as she will appreciate, to anyone who has been affected. At least she is acknowledging that things could be resolved.

There has been much talk today across the House about whether this is our fault or the Government’s fault, and everything else. I make the point to the Minister that in September last year a UN report on the Government’s policies on disabled people by the Committee on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities said that those policies were creating a “human catastrophe” for disabled people. That is something that has never been put to a Labour Government. Does she not understand that this massive underpayment of ESA is only reinforcing the fact that the Government are destroying disabled people’s lives?

Sarah Newton: I utterly reject the suggestion that we are destroying the lives of disabled people. We did not agree with the United Nations at the time, because we did not think that it had taken into consideration all the evidence that we had given to it. I published a full response to the UN, which I hope very much that the hon. Gentleman will read. It is in the Library, and it shows the huge amount of support that we are giving to disabled people.
Benefits for disabled people in our country have never been higher, but we are not at all complacent. We know that there is more to do. I want all disabled people in our country to be able to live their lives independently and play their full part in society, and we will continue to ensure that that is the case.

Jessica Morden (Newport East) (Lab): A constituent who rang my office this morning was concerned that if they received the money that was underpaid, it might then be clawed back from other benefits. Will the Minister confirm that that will not happen?

Sarah Newton: That is a very good question, and I can assure the hon. Lady’s constituent that it will not happen. The full details are in the “frequently asked questions” section in the Library.

Valerie Vaz (Walsall South) (Lab): Will the Leader of the House please give us the forthcoming business?

The Leader of the House of Commons (Andrea Leadsom): The business for next week will include the following:

Monday 22 October—Remaining stages of the Offensive Weapons Bill.
Tuesday 23 October—Remaining stages of the Civil Liability Bill [Lords].
Wednesday 24 October—Consideration of a Business of the House motion, followed by all stages of the Northern Ireland (Executive Formation and Exercise of Functions) Bill.
Thursday 25 October—General debate on folic acid fortification, followed by a general debate on the inclusive transport strategy.
Friday 26 October—Private Members’ Bills.

The provisional business for the week commencing 29 October will include the following:

Monday 29 October—My right hon. Friend the Chancellor of the Exchequer will deliver his Budget statement.
Tuesday 30 October—Continuation of the Budget debate.
Wednesday 31 October—Continuation of the Budget debate.
Thursday 1 November—Conclusion of the Budget debate.
Friday 2 November—The House will not be sitting.

Colleagues will also wish to know that, subject to the progress of business, the House will rise at the close of business on Thursday 14 February and return on Monday 25 February.

Today the restoration and renewal Bill will be published in draft, and I think the House should be proud that progress is at last being made on proposals that will safeguard Parliament for generations to come. Today is also World Menopause Day. Greater awareness of the impact on millions of women is important if we are to ensure that women at all ages and stages can lead fulfilling and productive lives.

Finally, I am sure that the whole House will want to congratulate you, Sir Lindsay, on your visit to Buckingham Place yesterday to receive your knighthood.

Valerie Vaz: Congratulations from our side of the House too, Mr Deputy Speaker.

I thank the Leader of the House for giving us the forthcoming business. Let me start by paying tribute to Patricia Hollis, who has sadly died. She made an incredible contribution to public life. I know that she will be missed by the Labour party, but I also know that the whole country is at a loss without her amazing talents.

I am pleased to learn that the Offensive Weapons Bill will be back on Monday, but I think that it would have been helpful if the Government had informed the Opposition in time. There were three statements last Monday, and two points of order on the change of business. There were also three hours remaining, during which we could have debated the Bill, but the House
rose early, at 7 pm. Will the Leader of the House ensure that all parties are told of any change of business as soon as possible?

I thank the Leader of the House for announcing the February recess dates. It is half-term for many parents. May I try again, and ask her to discuss the Easter recess dates with her colleagues?

The Leader of the House said that on Wednesday the House would debate the Northern Ireland (Executive Formation and Exercise of Functions) Bill. Will she join me in welcoming members of the British-Irish Parliamentary Assembly, which will hold its 57th plenary session this weekend? They will come to Parliament next Tuesday, and will meet Mr Speaker—and hopefully you as well, Mr Deputy Speaker. Both the hon. Member for Romford (Andrew Rosindell) and my hon. Friend the Member for Bristol South (Karin Smyth) have worked hard to promote co-operation between the UK and Irish Parliaments, which will be very important in the forthcoming months.

My hon. Friend the Member for Gedling (Vernon Coaker) is the co-chair of the all-party parliamentary group on human trafficking and modern slavery, and wanted to remind us that today is Anti-slavery Day. The Walk Free Foundation estimates that there are 136,000 victims of modern slavery in the UK; in 2014 there were 13,000. The charity Anti-Slavery International estimates that there are 2,118 children identified as potential victims of child trafficking in the UK, a 66% increase on the year before. But the charity has said that the UK Government do not have a coherent plan for preventing child trafficking. May we have a statement on what the Government are doing to tackle modern slavery in the UK?

It is Black History Month and tomorrow is wear red day, a campaign by Show Racism the Red Card. I and many other hon. Members signed a petition for the removal of a sociology textbook approved by the exam board AQA, which is presumably also approved by the Department for Education, which perpetuated an untrue racial stereotype about African-Caribbean men. The book has now been withdrawn.

Why does it take a petition or legal action by the Child Poverty Action Group about employment and support allowance underpayments for vulnerable people to get the money to which they are entitled? Now, after pressure, universal credit has also been delayed. We needed the reassurances that the Leader of the House gave last week that we can debate regulations on the Floor of the House in the usual way, but I want more than that from her—I want to be told that we are going to debate the managed migration to UC, whenever that happens, on the Floor of the House and have a vote.

The Government clearly cannot manage their business of the House update the House on whether the Government are on top of the 800 statutory instruments that need to be laid before Parliament before the UK exits the EU? The Journal Office has said that only 33 negative SIs relating to the UK’s exit from the EU have been laid and only 46 proposed SIs are currently going through the European Statutory Instruments Committee. Last week a Delegated Legislation Committee sadly took one hour to discuss one SI, and the Minister present did not even have the necessary information about the impact of the SI, nor whether the Government had conducted an equalities assessment. Can the Leader of the House give us a timetable for when the EU SIs will be laid and the affirmative ones debated?

Is Parliament sovereign? Last night we learned that the Prime Minister cannot win in a straight vote without fixing the rules. The Government have fought at every stage to avoid a vote on a final meaningful deal. Our clever shadow Secretary of State for Exiting the European Union added those words for a reason—“a meaningful vote”, he said, not a meaningless vote. Has anyone checked with “Dicey on the Constitution”? Can the Leader of the House confirm that the Government are not using the Procedure Committee to take sovereignty away from Parliament by not giving Parliament a meaningful vote on the final deal? This is not a minority dictatorship; this is a parliamentary democracy, and Parliament is sovereign. This is the most outrageous power grab by the Government that has ever been seen. Will the Leader of the House make a statement to the House on the constitutional position of not allowing an amendable motion, and will she do her constitutional duty of being the House’s representative in Cabinet?

Staying with the EU, there is good news: we congratulate England on beating Spain, in Spain, for the first time in 38 years. Who says you can’t win with kids? And it seems that the full English special is back on the menu, and in Climate Change Week, the “fracking three” are free. We have had “Girl with Balloon” shredded, and now it seems that Banksy’s latest is “Woman with Chequers Plan shredded.”

Andrea Leadsom: I should like to start by agreeing with the hon. Lady about Baroness Hollis, who has passed away—she will be much missed. The House owes her a great debt of gratitude for her campaigning on behalf of the poor and vulnerable in our society.

The hon. Lady asked about Monday’s business on the Offensive Weapons Bill. As was explained at the time, a group of important amendments was tabled, but a knife had already been agreed for 7 pm, which would have allowed less than half an hour to debate those amendments. It was felt better to reschedule the debate and, as she will have noticed, I have indeed rescheduled it for next week.

The hon. Lady mentioned the Easter recess. I am pleased to hear that she is happy about the February recess, but I am not surprised to hear that she has something else to complain about. That is par for the course for her, I am sorry to say.

I completely echo the hon. Lady’s welcome for the members of the British-Irish Parliamentary Assembly. We look forward to hearing what they have to say, and we all celebrate the co-operation between the British and Irish groups.

Turning to the European Union, can the Leader of the House update the House on whether the Government are on top of the 800 statutory instruments that need to be laid before Parliament before the UK exits the EU? The Journal Office has said that only 33 negative SIs relating to the UK’s exit from the EU have been laid and only 46 proposed SIs are currently going through the European Statutory Instruments Committee. Last week a Delegated Legislation Committee sadly took one hour to discuss one SI, and the Minister present did not even have the necessary information about the impact of the SI, nor whether the Government had conducted an equalities assessment. Can the Leader of the House give us a timetable for when the EU SIs will be laid and the affirmative ones debated?
The hon. Lady highlighted the importance of Anti-slavery Day, and she is absolutely right to say that it is an opportunity to raise awareness of the scale of modern slavery in the United Kingdom and abroad. There are an estimated 40 million victims worldwide, which shows that these crimes are far from having been consigned to the history books. As she will know, the Government have made tackling modern slavery a top domestic and foreign policy priority, including by introducing the first Modern Slavery Act in 2015, which was introduced by the Prime Minister when she was Home Secretary. This is an important priority for the Government.

The hon. Lady mentioned Black History Month. She might be delighted, as I was, to read in the press that more is being done to ensure that more of the history of black races in the world is being brought into our history books. That is incredibly important, as the history books have been far too white-focused, and it will be interesting to see how that imbalance is addressed.

The hon. Lady asked about debating statutory instruments on the Floor of the House. She knows that it is a matter of parliamentary convention that when the Opposition make a reasonable request for a debate on an SI on the Floor of the House, time is allowed for such a debate. I think the Government have demonstrated in this Session that we have been willing to provide such time. In fact, we have agreed to more such requests from the Opposition than at any time since 1997.

The hon. Lady mentioned Northamptonshire County Council. She will be aware that that is my own local county council, and this is an issue that I am incredibly concerned about. The Secretary of State for Housing, Communities and Local Government has brought in commissioners to deal with the specific issues of Northamptonshire County Council, and the local councillors are making proposals on how to ensure that my constituents and all other Northamptonshire residents get the best value for money as well as good services.

The hon. Lady asked specifically about the statutory instruments relating to the Brexit process. I had a very good informal meeting with the sifting Committee yesterday, and I was able to assure its members that we will be giving them as much information as possible on the flow of statutory instruments relating to Brexit, and that, having changed the process for monitoring the flow and quality of SIs, I am confident that this will be manageable, that it is in line with other parliamentary Sessions, and that all those SIs will be brought forward in good time for exit day.

Finally, the hon. Lady mentioned the sifting Committee. I think the publication of the report is a matter for the sifting Committee, but the Prime Minister cobbled together the no-deal arrangements. The Leader of the House clarified a couple of things about the meaningful vote. We are grateful that the motion will be amendable, but there must be no suggestion that there will be a binary choice between a disastrous Brexit and the horrors of no deal. This was all about taking back control and the sovereignty of this House, so it must be up to the House to determine the biggest decision that it has made for a few decades. We must be reassured here and today that there will not be a binary choice.

Finally, who once said:

“I don’t think the UK should leave the EU. It would be a disaster for our economy”?

Was it Michel Barnier, Pete Wishart, or Andrea Leadsom? May we have a debate on cognitive memory recall, and perhaps ask the Leader of the House to lead for us on that one?

Andrea Leadsom: I love the hon. Gentleman’s interventions. I must say that I am really grateful to the many right hon. and hon. Members and members of the press who have been so determined to find out exactly what went on in the Leader of the House’s office on Monday night, and I think I can fully reassure all colleagues on three very important points: first, we went for a thin and crispy base; secondly, there were absolutely no cheesy bites; and, thirdly, I made sure that there were fresh carrot sticks for all my guests. I hope that I have now cleared that up.
The hon. Gentleman asks about the meaningful vote—he is right to do so. On the one hand, anything other than a straightforward approval of the deal will bring huge uncertainty for businesses, consumers and citizens but, on the other hand, any motion of the House is a matter for the House to decide. As we have noted on many occasions, the Speaker will decide whether to accept amendments in the usual way.

Finally, the hon. Gentleman asked about my comments, which I did anticipate, because he tweeted that he was going to ask me—[Interruption.] Yes, it was helpful. I want to address the matter seriously, because a lot of people are concerned. When I was a Back Bencher, I established with Conservative colleagues something called the Fresh Start Project, which was about seeking fundamental reform of the European Union, and it could be said that we really took our duties seriously. We travelled the EU and met like-minded politicians from both sides of the political spectrum. We really did our homework, and proposed a profound, fundamental set of reforms right across all areas of the EU, with a genuine desire to see a reformed EU that the UK would remain in. As someone who grew up as a member of the EU, as an awful lot of people in this country did, it seemed that reform was the No. 1 priority.

It became apparent during the discussions between the previous Prime Minister and the EU, however, that reform is simply not on the table. That was very clear, and that was when my opinion changed. The European Union cannot expect to trap countries into its ambitions, and that was when my opinion changed. The European Union cannot expect to trap countries into its ambitions, which is why I am a very proud Brexiteer and very keen on the United Kingdom being a fully sovereign nation again: once we leave the European Union next March.

Sir Edward Leigh (Gainsborough) (Con): There was misreporting about our Procedure Committee yesterday. We wrote to the Secretary of State for Exiting the European Union, and on no occasion did he ask us to change the rules. The situation, as outlined by the Clerks, is very clear: if there is no deal, the Government must lay a motion in neutral terms under section 13(4) of the European Union (Withdrawal) Act 2018. Such a motion is unamendable, and attempts to politicise the office of the Speaker are completely outwith our rules and procedures. If there is a deal, there will be a vote under section 13(1) on an amendable motion, but if the Government are defeated in that vote, it defeats the deal.

In either case, Brexit proceeds under our procedure. It is now unstoppable and nobody in Parliament—[Interruption.] No, under the existing Act, nobody in Parliament can stop it, except the Government. Will the Government give me a categorical assurance that, whether or not there is a deal, or whether a deal is defeated, Brexit proceeds at the end of March and the Government will not delay it by a single day?

Andrea Leadsom: The United Kingdom will be leaving the European Union on 29 March 2019. To clarify again: once a deal with the EU has been agreed, Parliament will have a vote on the withdrawal agreement and the terms of our future partnership. Parliament will have the choice to accept or reject that deal. If Parliament accepts the deal, we will introduce an EU withdrawal agreement Bill to implement the agreement in domestic legislation; if Parliament chooses to reject the deal, the Government will be unable to ratify the agreement.

Ian Mearns (Gateshead) (Lab): I am surprised by the revelation that the Leader of the House provides carrot sticks to her guests—carrot and stick all in one handy bite.

I am also a little surprised that the Leader of the House did not announce the provisional business for the short week commencing 5 November, which will be the last opportunity to commemorate the 100th anniversary of the great war before 11 November 2018. I had hoped for some clarity on that.

I welcome the fact that the first debate on Thursday 25 October will be on folic acid fortification, which was the subject of a Backbench Business Committee application by my hon. Friend the Member for Pontypridd (Owen Smith) to commemorate Spina Bifida and Hydrocephalus Awareness Week. I hope that the Chair will look favourably on him and call him early in the debate.

I have been thinking about this for a long time, and I do not like to abuse my position as Chair of the Backbench Business Committee, but may we have a debate in Government time on local government finance? The Government have, over the past eight years, incrementally withdrawn the revenue support grant from local authorities, and they continue to do so, but they have done nothing to rectify the other side of the equation, which is council tax, the council tax base and how council tax is raised. The situation is having a much more detrimental impact in some councils than others. We need to air that in a debate so we can see how to get a real solution, which will benefit councils that have experienced the greatest losses.

Sir Mike Penning (Hemel Hempstead) (Con): May I also congratulate you, Mr Deputy Speaker, on your richly deserved great honour? Tomorrow is breast cancer care day, and we will all be wearing something pink. Some of us look nicer in pink than others, but it is an important day as we highlight breast cancer, which is still a killer for so many of our constituents.

May I declare an interest and request a debate on the persecution of veterans who served in Northern Ireland, as I did through the ‘70s and ‘80s and in Operation Banner? It is fundamentally wrong that our ex-servicemen are being treated like terrorists. It is scaring them to death to be dragged into a judicial process that was resolved years and years ago. They have been forgotten, I am afraid, by Governments of parties on both sides of the House. They did not ask to go to Northern Ireland; they were sent. There were sent to do a job to keep the peace, and it is fundamentally wrong that they are being prosecuted today.
Andrea Leadsom: I am extremely sympathetic to my right hon. Friend’s comments. Without any doubt, we owe a vast debt of gratitude to the heroism and bravery of all our soldiers and police officers who upheld the rule of law and were themselves accountable to it. He will appreciate that the current system in Northern Ireland is not working well for soldiers, police officers or victims. I encourage him to raise his question directly with Ministers during Defence questions on Monday 22 October or Northern Ireland questions on Wednesday 31 October.

Diana Johnson: Yesterday the chair of the inquiry into infected blood, Sir Brian Langstaff, published a letter to the Cabinet Office in which he calls for decisive action on the financial support available to those infected and those affected. The inquiry is likely to take several years to reach its conclusions, but people do not have financial security at the moment and there is different support in the different nations of the United Kingdom. I wonder whether we might have a statement from the Cabinet Office in response to Sir Brian’s letter.

Andrea Leadsom: I pay tribute to the hon. Lady, who has been tireless in looking into this issue and raising it in this place. Some of my constituents have suffered due to this appalling contaminated blood problem, and she is absolutely right to raise it. If she wants to write to me, I can take up the matter directly with the Cabinet Office on her behalf.

Philip Davies: David Thompson started wearing women’s clothes and a wig and changed his name to Karen White so that he could be moved to a female prison. Unbelievably he was, from where he sexually abused four female prisoners. His conviction was confirmed in the courts last week. Please may we have a debate on how we can stop this madness, which created four unnecessary female victims of crime? If it is not stopped, we will create further unnecessary victims of crime. This is putting women at risk, so please may we have a debate to find out how we can stop it from ever happening again?

Andrea Leadsom: My hon. Friend raises an incredibly important issue. The subject of the abuse of legal gender recognition processes has been raised a number of times in several different ways. The Government want to make the legal gender recognition process less intrusive and bureaucratic for transgender people, but at the same time to ensure that we protect women from abuse. As I understand it, the consultation is ongoing until tomorrow and I encourage my hon. Friend to feed his concerns into that.

Kevin Brennan: On 1 November, importantly, cannabis-based medicines will be able to be prescribed without licence, but some patients, including Bailey Williams, a young boy from my constituency whose mother is Rachel Rankmore, have consultants who appear to be unwilling under any circumstances to prescribe cannabis-based medicines. May we have a statement from the Health Secretary about whether we can make available to these patients NHS facilities and consultants who would be willing to consider prescribing such medicines in order to relieve terrible suffering and save lives?

Mr John Hayes: Lincolnshire’s excellent police and crime commissioner, Marc Jones, has alerted me to an organised, ruthless and serious network of foreign criminals who have established the illegal supply of tobacco and alcohol on an industrial scale. These illegal cigarettes have already led to fires and fatalities in my constituency. Will the Leader of the House ask a Treasury Minister to come here, so that we can ensure that Her Majesty’s Revenue and Customs is looking at the way these things are supplied—shops exist solely for the purposes of money laundering—and a Home Office Minister to come here, so that we can make sure that, post Brexit, with the end of free movement, these people are deported post haste?

Andrea Leadsom: My right hon. Friend is raising a very serious issue—the rise in organised crime—which I know will be of concern to many hon. Members. He will be aware that the Government have invested significantly in new cyber techniques in order to be able to catch, trap and round up these organised crime gangs. He is right to raise this point and I encourage him to raise it directly with Home Office Ministers on Monday week, 29 October.

Mr Jim Cunningham: In response to the hon. Member for Perth and North Perthshire, the Leader of the House gave us the menu for the pizza meeting last Monday night, but she did not say whether she had any champagne. Now to get serious, Orbit, a housing association, has houses in my constituency, but when I correspond with it, it uses the Data Protection Act to deny me answers or an amendment to the legislation, because this really is not good enough, as it is distancing Members from their constituents?

Andrea Leadsom: The hon. Gentleman is raising an important point about the responses that MPs, who are there to represent and support their constituents, receive from social housing and other public sector organisations, which might, on occasion, be seen to hide behind data protection rules. He is right to raise the matter. There should not be any limits for Members of Parliament who are legitimately representing the interests of their constituents, and I suggest he raises the issue at Department for Digital, Culture, Media and Sport questions, which will take place on Thursday 1 November.

Andrew Jones: Genomics England, a company wholly owned by the NHS, is carrying out its 100,000 genomes project, the largest of its kind in the world. It is sequencing the genomes of NHS patients with rare diseases and cancer. It is a
nationwide project, but my local trust, Harrogate and District NHS Foundation Trust, is participating in it. The project is designed to develop a new genomics service for the NHS and boost medical research. Please may we have a statement from a Health and Social Care Minister on this excellent project and how it will contribute to transforming the care that patients will receive?

**Andrea Leadsom:** My hon. Friend is raising an incredibly important development in the world of genomics and big data and how we can transform healthcare. This is a very exciting time and I encourage him to seek a Westminster Hall debate, because it is important that all right hon. and hon. Members get the chance not only to feed in their views, but to be informed about some of the amazing advances that are coming down the track.

**Several hon. Members rose—**

**Mr Deputy Speaker (Sir Lindsay Hoyle):** I call Ian Murray.

**Ian Murray (Edinburgh South) (Lab):** Thank you very much, Sir Deputy Speaker. [HON. MEMBERS: “Hear, hear.”] It is always good to crawl. The Leader of the House said to the shadow Leader of the House that the EU withdrawal Bill could be amended, rejected or accepted, but in the answer to the hon. Member for Gainsborough (Sir Edward Leigh), when she read her notes, she omitted the word “amended”. So may we have a meaningful debate on the meaning of the word “meaningful”? Will she confirm that the Government’s EU withdrawal deal will be amendable?

**Andrea Leadsom:** I say again that the House will be well aware of the fact that whether or not debate ought to be organised through a business of the House motion, and the form of any such motion, is ultimately in the hands of the House itself. The House has the power to amend, approve or reject such a motion, but it is also very important to recognise the need for the House to consider the question that is before the United Kingdom, which is whether or not to accept the deal that the Government have negotiated with the EU. Anything other than a straightforward approval of the deal would lead to great uncertainty for businesses and citizens, because any changes might mean that the Government are not in a position to ratify the deal.

**Jeremy Lefroy (Stafford) (Con):** A constituent of mine was mis-sold an interest-rate hedge by Barclays bank. He was eventually paid back the money that he had paid and offered compensation of £37.50. He was then forced to sell his properties at well below their market value, despite my asking for a bit of time so that they could be sold at a reasonable price. I have written to Barclays twice to ask it to look again at the case because of the situation that they put my constituents in, but the bank has not replied to my letters. May we have a debate on banks and other institutions that simply do not respect MPs who are trying to do something on behalf of their constituents?

**Andrea Leadsom:** My hon. Friend raises such an important point. As a member of the Treasury Committee and then as the City Minister, I was absolutely disgusted to see some of the really harrowing stories about businesspeople who lost their livelihoods and years and years of work because of the mis-selling of all sorts of interest-rate products, including interest-rate swaps. It really was disgraceful behaviour. My hon. Friend will be aware that the Financial Conduct Authority has looked into this issue and there have been several reviews, but I absolutely agree with him that it is not acceptable for a bank simply not to reply to his request for further investigation. The Chairman of the Backbench Business Committee, the hon. Member for Gateshead (Ian Mearns), was looking interestedly at my hon. Friend when he asked his question, so I gently suggest that it would be a good subject for a lengthy Back-Bench debate. I am very happy to provide the time for that and would very much like to take part in such a debate myself.

**Albert Owen (Ynys Môn) (Lab):** Will the Leader of the House allocate Government time for a debate on the future of the post office network? We have seen accelerated bank closures, and ATMs are disappearing in towns and villages throughout the country. The Government, and the coalition Government before it, boasted about the resource that they put into the network, but that resource has been used to close it down. We need a vision and a Government who allocate the time to direct that vision.

**Andrea Leadsom:** I hope I can reassure the hon. Gentleman that the overall number of post offices is not reducing. On 11 October, the Post Office announced that 40 post offices—[Interruption.] Do hon. Members want to hear the answer? Perhaps they just like to shout me down. I am trying to answer the hon. Gentleman’s question. The overall number of post offices is not reducing. On 11 October, the Post Office announced plans to relocate 40 post offices into WHSmith stores in 2019, and WHSmith will also move to a franchise arrangement for 33 post offices that are already sited in its stores, taking the total number of post offices operated by WHSmith in its stores to more than 200.

A separate issue is when sub-postmasters decide to retire and there is a problem with finding somebody to take over the post office, but I reassure the hon. Gentleman that the change and the relocations into WHSmith stores are intended to maintain a good service for all our constituents, who often find that the opening hours of their village post office are better than those of a high street bank, and that is of benefit to them.

**Stephen Kerr (Stirling) (Con):** Stirling is an epicentre of volunteering. I am proud to tell the House that Stirling is the sole UK city candidate to be Europe’s capital of volunteering in 2020. Will the Leader of the House join me in paying tribute to the volunteers in Stirling and up and down the country? The Government do recognise the huge importance of volunteering and we continue to support and encourage it. We have recently published our civil society strategy, which sets out our aim to enable everyone
to provide their own voluntary contributions throughout their lives. I wish Stirling great success with its candidacy for Europe’s capital of volunteering in 2020.

Alison Thewliss (Glasgow Central) (SNP): As we speak, Possibilities for Each and Every Kid in Glasgow is about to celebrate its 18th birthday. This year, it was awarded the Queen’s Award for Voluntary Service for its work encouraging young people into volunteering, outdoor play and creative arts. It has also done lots of work in schools, transforming breakfast clubs in schools such as Dalmarnock Primary. May we have a debate on the contribution of organisations such as PEEK to young people’s health and wellbeing?

Andrea Leadsom: I am delighted to join the hon. Lady in congratulating that organisation on its excellent work and wishing it the best on its 18th birthday. She is right, as is my hon. Friend the Member for Stirling (Stephen Kerr), to raise the important work that volunteers do right up and down the country. I share her pleasure in celebrating its success and encourage Members to seek opportunities, perhaps through a Westminster Hall debate, so that we can all share in some of the local successes in our constituencies.

Martin Vickers (Cleethorpes) (Con): On Monday, I met representatives from the National Federation of Retail Newsagents and they echoed the concerns of shopkeepers in my Cleethorpes constituency that retail crime is not being prioritised by some police forces. They also expressed concern that, with the growing demands on the police, perhaps from the further extension of hate crime legislation, retail crime might slip even further down the list of priorities. Will the Leader of the House arrange for a debate on retail crime and on how the police will respond to it?

Andrea Leadsom: My hon. Friend is right that our high streets need as much support as possible and that includes protecting them from crime. All incidents should be reported to the police to enable them to gather the intelligence necessary to be able to deal with these criminals. Often, the police are concerned that these crimes go unreported, so I encourage all those experiencing retail trade crime to report it. I can tell him that we are working hard with industry and the police, through the national retail crime steering group, to make sure that retailers have the tools that they need to prevent and manage particularly violent incidents and to allow the police to target their resources appropriately.

Jessica Morden (Newport East) (Lab): The Home Affairs Committee has rightly criticised the Home Office for its data handling and for losing people’s immigration documents. Can we have a chance to scrutinise Ministers on this? I say that on behalf of a constituent who now has to replace two passports, four birth certificates, three DNA tests and a marriage certificate.

Andrea Leadsom: I am very sympathetic to the hon. Lady’s point. It is unacceptable when documents get lost in that way. I encourage her to take up her constituent’s issues at Home Office questions, which are on Monday 29 October.

Bob Blackman (Harrow East) (Con): Today is the last day of Navaratri and those of us who have been dancing the Garba and Dandiya raas feel healthier and fitter as a result. I say to colleagues not to despair because Sharad Purnima and Diwali are coming up, so there is still more chance for greater fitness. Will my right hon. Friend join me in wishing Hindus, Sikhs and Jains a happy Navami as we celebrate the triumph of light over darkness and good over evil? Can we have a debate in Government time on how we can use the benefits of dance to overcome childhood obesity?

Andrea Leadsom: My hon. Friend raises an important point. I join him in wishing his constituents and others around the country happy Navami. With my own pizza-eating habits, I shall certainly be needing to take advantage of any dancing opportunities that I find.

Vicky Foxcroft (Lewisham, Deptford) (Lab): Last week, I asked the Leader of the House when we would have a debate on the public health model that the Home Office announced we would be adopting to reduce youth violence. She helpfully said that she would consult with Home Office colleagues. Will she update the House on how those discussions went and when we are likely to have this extremely important debate?

Andrea Leadsom: I have taken up this issue with Home Office colleagues. I believe that I asked the hon. Lady to write to me if she had a specific question that she wanted me to raise with them. It is Home Office questions on 29 October, so I encourage her to raise the issue directly with the Department then.

David Linden (Glasgow East) (SNP): Can we have Government statement about payday lending and the role of the Financial Conduct Authority? A recent BBC piece told the story of Danny Cheetham, whose initial £100 loan spiralled to a debt of £19,000. Many constituents have written to me with concerns about this issue, so please can we have a statement from the Economic Secretary to the Treasury about the role of the FCA, which appears to be asleep at the wheel?

Andrea Leadsom: The hon. Gentleman will be aware that a cap was put on payday lending interest rates, although I would sympathise with him if he were to say that it is still too high; this is a genuine problem. The Government has done as much as possible to facilitate new entrants to the lending market. The Budget debate will be a good opportunity to raise this matter directly with Ministers, and I encourage the hon. Gentleman to do so.

Chris Elmore (Ogmore) (Lab): Many constituents have raised with me in recent days their dismay at the amount of tax being paid by online giants, with reports suggesting that Facebook will only be paying £7.4 million in tax. My constituents and the constituents of the Leader of the House all pay their tax, so can we have an urgent debate to ensure that these online giants start paying their taxes? Will she also press the Chancellor to ensure that he addresses this matter in the Budget in 10 days’ time?

Andrea Leadsom: All hon. Members will be very sympathetic to the hon. Gentleman’s point. We all agree that it is only fair that online businesses pay their fair share of taxes. The Chancellor has already made some warm noises towards addressing this issue, and I will remind him that the hon. Gentleman has raised it today.

Business of the House
Chris Williamson (Derby North) (Lab): Can we have a debate in Government time on the application of section 21 of the Housing Act 1988, because it is being used in a cavalier and callous fashion? There is a cowboy company operating in Derby known as Enabling Homes, but it is actually enabling homelessness. Last week, it completed a purchase on a block of flats in Mackworth in my constituency, and the very next day it issued section 21 notices to the tenants, evicting them in two months’ time—just in time for Christmas. This is a scandal, so can we please have a debate?

Andrea Leadsom: I am very concerned to hear the hon. Gentleman’s story. I agree that he should look into this matter very carefully, and I am sure that he will do so. Perhaps he will apply for an Adjournment debate on that specific issue, but I also encourage him to take it up directly with Ministers at the Ministry of Housing, Communities and Local Government to ensure that there is not some fundamental problem that needs to be addressed.

Patricia Gibson (North Ayrshire and Arran) (SNP): The Civil Nuclear Constabulary is a specialist armed police force dedicated to protecting civil nuclear sites across the UK, such as Hunterston in my constituency. The Civil Nuclear Constabulary will “deter any attacker whose intent is the theft or sabotage of nuclear material whether static or in transit”, potentially risking their own lives for our safety. Can we have a statement on the great concern caused by the fact that raising the retirement age of these officers to 67 and 68 will render their service “unsustainable”, according to the chief constable of the constabulary?

Andrea Leadsom: I join the hon. Lady in paying tribute to the Civil Nuclear Constabulary. Having been an energy Minister myself, I have met some officers so I know that they take high risks and have to be very carefully trained. It is important that we recognise the fact that people are living longer and that public sector workers are all working for longer periods. Some of these officers are redeployed into other areas as they reach the end of their working lives, but the hon. Lady may well wish to raise the matter directly with Ministers at the Department for Business, Energy and Industrial Strategy. If she wants to write to me, I can take it up with them on her behalf.

Andy Slaughter (Hammersmith) (Lab): There are fresh reports in the press today about contamination of Pret a Manger products—in this case, seafood, which can be a serious allergen in vegetarian flatbread. These serious breaches of safety have killed people, including my constituent Natasha Ednan-Laperouse, but nothing is happening in Government. We have been told there is a review, but can we have a statement from the Secretary of State for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs about what is being reviewed, the terms of reference and when it will report, before more people die?

Andrea Leadsom: First, may I say how sorry everybody was to hear of the death of the hon. Gentleman’s constituent. It was a terribly tragic event, and we send our deepest sympathies to her family. He is right to raise the importance of the accuracy of food labelling. I believe a statement was made at the time, and we have just had DEFRA questions, at which I hope he was able to raise this directly with Ministers. If he wants to write to me, I can take it up with them on his behalf.

Colleen Fletcher (Coventry North East) (Lab): Every year in the UK, about 1,300 blood cancer patients need a stem cell transplant from an unrelated donor in order to save their lives. It is possible to join the stem cell donor register at 16, but I am concerned to learn from the charity Anthony Nolan that young people often do not know about the register or hold misconceptions about stem cell donation. May we have a debate about adding stem cell donation, alongside organ and blood donation, to the statutory guidance on health education for secondary school pupils?

Andrea Leadsom: The hon. Lady makes an excellent suggestion, and one that I personally would support. I was delighted recently when in my own constituency we achieved one of the largest groups of donors in the country. She is absolutely right, however, that we need to do more to make people aware of what donation means physically and what it could mean for those they help. I would certainly support that, and I encourage her to take it up at Health questions next week.

Ben Lake (Ceredigion) (PC): Can we have an urgent statement on the assistance the Government can offer to those communities devastated by Storm Callum at the weekend and the possibility of drawing down support from the EU solidarity fund? Towns and villages in the south of Ceredigion and in the constituency of my hon. Friend the Member for Carmarthen East and Dinefwr (Jonathan Edwards) were particularly impacted by unprecedented levels of flooding, and assistance with the clean-up and the reconstruction costs is urgently needed.

Andrea Leadsom: I am aware that the hon. Gentleman sought an urgent question on this subject, and I think we were all horrified at the photos in the news of the appalling flooding in his area. It is Welsh questions next week, and I encourage him to take that matter up directly with Ministers.

Jim McMahon (Oldham West and Royton) (Lab/Co-op): I thank the Leader of the House for giving us an insight into “The Italian Job” meeting that took place, but I should manage expectations: it is going to take a hell of a lot of carrots to see though this darkness.

It is half-term next week and the week after, and some MPs will be taking charge of their children while also coming into the House to vote. Can we look at the arrangements whereby our children have to go through security screening coming into the building, in a way that MPs do not?

Andrea Leadsom: The hon. Gentleman raises an important point—not the first point; the second one. I am meeting the head of security in Parliament this afternoon to raise a number of issues, including the security arrangements. Obviously, we have to take security very seriously—we cannot cut corners—but there has to be a balance between enabling people such as Members’ children to come in, as well as young work experience students and so on, and protecting everyone who works in this place. I plan to raise that this afternoon.
Rachel Maskell (York Central) (Lab/Co-op): Further to the question from my hon. Friend the Member for Ynys Môn (Albert Owen), the closure of York’s only Crown post office, which has been based at 22 Lendal since 1884, was announced last Thursday, without any consultation with key stakeholders, including the high street. Clearly this will have a devastating impact on our city centre. Given the lack of statement from a Minister, may we have a debate in Government time to discuss the future of our high streets and post offices?

Andrea Leadsom: I am sorry to hear about the post office closure in the centre of York. Obviously I do not know the precise circumstances or whether there are other post offices—I am sure there must be—in York. [Interruption.] No post office counters whatsoever? Well, I am genuinely sorry to hear that, and I encourage the hon. Lady to seek an Adjournment debate so that she can raise the matter directly with Ministers.

Melanie Onn (Great Grimsby) (Lab): I am sure that the right hon. Lady is an avid reader of the Grimsby Telegraph, as everybody in the House will be—if not, they should be—and will have seen this week a really dreadful story about an attack on police officers. A young man of 25, Josse Jackson, has been sentenced to 12 weeks for attacking two police officers, including a policewoman, spitting blood-filled spit at them, saying that he had AIDS and hepatitis C, and threatening to bite them. He got only a 12-week sentence. The chief constable and the Labour police and crime commissioner, Keith Hunter, have called for stronger sentences for these kinds of attacks, following a weekend when 11 police officers were injured. May we have a statement or debate about professional impact statements, looking at the experiences of people who work in the public sector, on the frontline, to see how that can improve the strength of our sentencing?

Andrea Leadsom: All hon. Members will be disgusted to hear of the event that the hon. Lady talks about—it is really horrifying, and no police officer should have to tolerate such awful abuse. I am very sympathetic to the points that she makes. The Under-Secretary of State for the Home Department, my hon. Friend the Member for Warrington Central, has heard what the hon. Lady said to hear of the event that the hon. Lady talks about—it is really disgusting. The hon. Lady might like to seek an Adjournment debate so that she can raise directly with Ministers what more can be done to support this area.

Justin Madders (Ellesmere Port and Neston) (Lab): On 23 May, I asked the Prime Minister about the proposed sale of Wembley stadium, and she told me that it was not a matter for Government. Yesterday it was announced that the sale is not going ahead, and the Sports Minister expressed disappointment. I have been applying for a debate on this matter every week for about six months, because there are important questions involved, not least the Government’s position. If the sale goes ahead, there are questions about securing fans’ interests for the future. Critically, now that the sale is not proceeding, what is the strategy for investment in grassroots football that was predicated on it? May we have a statement from the Government on all these very important issues?

Andrea Leadsom: I well understand that the hon. Gentleman has grave concerns about the future of Wembley. We have Department for Digital, Culture, Media and Sport questions on Thursday 1 November, which is just over a week away, and I encourage him to raise the issue directly with Ministers then.

Liz Twist (Blaydon) (Lab): The Leader of the House may be aware that Traidcraft, the fair trade company based in Team Valley in Gateshead, is going through difficult times. It is important that we keep fair trade organisations such as Traidcraft running and healthy. Will she arrange a debate in Government time on the importance of fair trade so that the House can discuss this matter, and will she join me in encouraging colleagues to buy something from the Traidcraft catalogue for Christmas in order to help it?

Andrea Leadsom: I am very happy to join the hon. Lady in encouraging hon. Members to buy from fair trade catalogues. I think we all support fair trade with developing nations, and it is important that we continue to do that. The hon. Lady might like to seek an Adjournment debate so that she can raise directly with Ministers what more can be done to support this area.

Martin Whitfield (East Lothian) (Lab): Will the Leader of the House be kind enough to join me in welcoming the family and friends of John Pitcairn Mackintosh, a former MP for Berwick and East Lothian? The Speaker has allowed us the use of his premises tonight to celebrate John Pitcairn’s life, which was cut so tragically short 40 years ago this year. May we have a debate in Government time to celebrate the former parliamentarians of this House and take the opportunity to learn from their experiences in the decisions that we need to make in the near future?

Andrea Leadsom: I am very happy to join the hon. Gentleman in welcoming the family to the Speaker’s apartments today. I also agree entirely that it is only by studying the past that we learn the lessons for the future. We would all do well to remember that.

Mr Deputy Speaker (Sir Lindsay Hoyle): I call Andrea Leadsom.

Mr Deputy Speaker: I call Thangam Debbonaire.

Judith Cummins (Bradford South) (Lab): Thank you, and congratulations, Mr Deputy Speaker.

We are one year on from the Government announcing tougher sentences for dangerous drivers, but despite repeated calls from across the House for the legislation to be brought into force, we are still no further forward. One family member of a victim said:

“The Government’s delay in implementing tougher penalties has denied my family the justice that we need.”

Will the Leader of the House tell us when these families can expect the justice that they deserve?

Andrea Leadsom: I pay tribute to the hon. Lady for her campaigning on this subject. I know that it means a great deal to her, and the whole House appreciates the work she has done. I do not have a further update for her right now, but if she would like to write to me, I can take it up with the Department on her behalf.

Mr Deputy Speaker: I call Thangam Debbonaire.
Thangam Debbonaire (Bristol West) (Lab): Thank you, Mr Sir Deputy Speaker, or however we are supposed to say it, and congratulations.

On 3 May, 12 July and 6 September, I asked the Leader of the House for the whereabouts of the immigration Bill, which we must have before 29 March. On 6 September, she said that it would be published after the publication of the Migration Advisory Committee report “and in good time”. That report was published on 11 September. It is now 18 October. Where is the immigration Bill? Does the Leader of the House see any sign of it coming this side of the new year?

Andrea Leadsom: The hon. Lady is a member of the Opposition Whips Office, and obviously she always has the usual channels in order to raise these issues. I say to her again, as I have said before, that all legislation is being brought forward in good time and as necessary to prepare for the United Kingdom leaving the European Union on 29 March 2019.

Jim Shannon (Strangford) (DUP): Earlier in the week, the Home Office published data that shows that there has been a huge surge in hate crime directed at people in England and Wales because of their religious beliefs. Figures recorded by the police show that over 8,000 incidents of this type of hate crime were recorded in 2017-18—up by a whopping 40% on 2016-17. Only yesterday, our noble Friends in the House of Lords had a debate to discuss this growing religious prejudice and intolerance in the United Kingdom of Great Britain and Northern Ireland. Will the Leader of the House agree to a similar debate, in Government time, on this pressing issue?


Stephen Doughty (Cardiff South and Penarth) (Lab/Co-op) rose—

Mr Deputy Speaker: I think colleagues have suggested that Mr Doughty come last, so thank you for that. I call Stephen Doughty.

Stephen Doughty: Thank you, Sir Lindsay.

On Brexit and the business of the House, the Leader of the House’s suggestion of a simple binary choice and, indeed, the attempts by the Government to choke off the control of this House over the Brexit decision are unacceptable, as the many thousands of people who will be marching through London on Saturday know all too well. But the Brexit mess has also impacted on important business on the Offensive Weapons Bill. I was pleased to hear her say that the Bill is coming back on Monday. Will she ensure that we have adequate time to debate new clause 1 on attacks on shopkeepers and retail workers, many of whom are suffering horrific attacks with knives and guns? The new clause is supported by many Co-operative MPs, my right hon. Friend the Member for Delyn (David Hanson), and others. It is a very important matter, so will she ensure we have time to discuss it?

Andrea Leadsom: Absolutely. I can assure the hon. Gentleman that the reason the business was pulled on Monday was precisely because we were concerned that there would not be sufficient time to discuss some of these very important issues, such as the one he raises. To be very clear again with regard to the meaningful vote, once the deal with the EU has been agreed, Parliament will have a vote on the withdrawal agreement and the terms of our future partnership. Parliament will have the choice of accepting or rejecting that deal, and, as we have said before, the Speaker will decide on whether to accept amendments to the motion in the usual way.

Mr Deputy Speaker: Can I just say thank you very much for all the kind words and kind comments—it is much appreciated and I do take it on board. To be quite honest, just to add to the pizza story, I tripped over the boxes and there was none left whatsoever.
Point of Order

12.19 pm

Dr Paul Williams (Stockton South) (Lab): On a point of order, Mr Deputy Speaker. During yesterday’s Prime Minister’s Questions, and again during yesterday’s Opposition day debate on social care, the hon. Member for Thirsk and Malton (Kevin Hollinrake) suggested that the joint report of the Housing, Communities and Local Government Committee and the Health and Social Care Committee recommended the adoption of a German-style social insurance system. He also suggested to the hon. Member for Central Ayrshire (Dr Whitford) that the report states that national insurance would not be a suitable vehicle for funding social care and that any social care programme should be “separated from Government”.

What the Committees actually said in their recommendations was that any social care premium could be contributed to “either...as an addition to National Insurance, or through a separate mechanism similar to the German model” and that “The Social Care Premium could be managed by central government, and audited by the National Audit Office, or managed separately by a statutory body or not for profit insurance based funds, as is the case in Germany.”

I would not want the Prime Minister or the Secretary of State for Health and Social Care to have got the wrong impression from the hon. Member for Thirsk and Malton on both Committees’ recommendations. Can you advise me on how the record could be clarified so that it reflects a full, fair and proper reading of the Select Committees’ recommendations?

Mr Deputy Speaker: I thank the hon. Gentleman for giving notice of his point of order. He has corrected the record, and it is now there for everybody to read. I think that that will deal with the matter for now.

BILL PRESENTED

NORTHERN IRELAND (EXECUTIVE FORMATION AND EXERCISE OF FUNCTIONS) BILL

Presentation and First Reading (Standing Order No. 57)

Secretary Bradley, supported by the Prime Minister, the Chancellor of the Duchy of Lancaster, Secretary Javid, Secretary Gauke, Secretary Mundell, Secretary Cairns, Mr Shaiilesh Vara and Oliver Dowden, presented a Bill to facilitate the formation of an Executive in Northern Ireland by extending the time for making Ministerial appointments following the election of the Northern Ireland Assembly on 2 March 2017; and to make provision about the exercise of governmental functions in, or in relation to, Northern Ireland in the absence of Northern Ireland Ministers.

Bill read the First time; to be read a Second time tomorrow, and to be printed (Bill 275) with explanatory notes (Bill 275-EN).

Backbench Business

Ending Exploitation in Supermarket Supply Chains

12.21 pm

Kerry McCarthy (Bristol East) (Lab): I beg to move,

That this House is concerned about the practice of modern slavery and the exploitation of labour in the supply chains of supermarkets in the UK; notes this week marks World Food Day and anti-slavery day; recognises the global leadership that the Government has shown in tackling modern slavery in supply chains in the Modern Slavery Act 2015; and calls on the Government to help ensure that steps are taken to protect the workers and farmers who produce food.

I am grateful to the Backbench Business Committee for granting the time for this debate and to my co-sponsors, my hon. Friend the Member for Gedling (Vernon Coaker), who chairs the all-party parliamentary group on human trafficking and modern slavery, and the hon. Member for York Outer (Julian Sturdy). Unfortunately, neither of them is able to join us.

From the recent industrial action by staff at McDonald’s, Wetherspoon’s and TGI Fridays to the International Labour Organisation’s estimate of more than 1.1 million victims of slavery working in the agricultural sector, that is all part of the same picture, showing that the cheap food we often take for granted all too often comes at a human cost. Today is World Anti-Slavery Day, and Tuesday was World Food Day, so this is a fitting time to start looking seriously at how we end this exploitation.

Long after the Morecambe bay disaster in 2004, when 21 Chinese illegal migrant labourers drowned while picking cockles, the Gangmasters and Labour Abuse Authority is still finding cases of human trafficking and slavery in the UK food industry. Earlier this year, a Cornish gangmaster who systematically exploited his workers—skimming off their pay, sending them to work double shifts with insufficient breaks and charging them to live in unsanitary caravans—was shut down by the GLAA. In Kent, 16 Lithuanian farm workers won a case against two gangmasters who forced them to work under threats of violence and kept them in squalid living conditions. Two other Lithuanian workers were trafficked to work in a meat processing plant, had their pay withheld and were subjected to violence. Their traffickers were sentenced to just three and a half years in jail.

There are numerous other examples from the meat-processing sector. A chicken factory in America was discovered to be employing illegal and under-age workers, blackmailing them to work for minimal pay in unsafe conditions under the threat of deportation. Quite often it is undocumented migrants who are most vulnerable to exploitation. Workers at the chicken factory were found to be wearing nappies at their post because they were not allowed to take toilet breaks.

The tomato industry is also rife with exploitation. Some 60% of UK tinned tomatoes come from southern Italy, where illegal gangmasters, who are part of organised crime, control worker recruitment and supervision. This is an extremely lucrative business, profiting from which an Italian prosecutor described as “conditions of absolute exploitation”. By contrast, in Florida, the Coalition of Immokalee Workers has transformed the tomato sector,
aiding prosecutions of slavery operations, forging alliances between farm workers and consumers, and leveraging consumer power to put pressure on the big supermarket buyers to end exploitation. That has now been rolled out to other American states, and it is a fantastic organisation.

The seafood sector is particularly notorious. In Ireland, a permit scheme for fishermen has seen African and Asian men trafficked on to trawlers, doing 20 hours a day of manual labour, legally bound to the employer and too scared to speak up for fear of arrest or deportation. Ireland now has a tier 2 ranking for trafficking—on a par with Indonesia and India—due to the Government’s failure adequately to protect victims and successfully convict traffickers.

The Environmental Justice Foundation uncovered horrific examples of slavery in the Thai seafood sector. Workers were tortured and abused, with wages, food and sleep withheld. Some men were kept at sea for months on end, being transferred from one ship to another without ever seeing dry land. They were force-fed methamphetamines to keep them working for longer, and bodies were thrown overboard when they were unable to go on. Some 59% of fishing workers had witnessed the murder of a fellow worker.

There is also evidence of Rohingya migrants from Myanmar being trafficked to camps, and even detention centres, and sold to Thai fishing vessels as slaves, yet millions of pounds’-worth of seafood products are still imported to the UK from Thailand every year. I want to make it clear that this is not just something happening overseas that has little to do with us. These are products on our supermarket shelves, and we are eating them without realising their links with slavery.

Ian Mearns (Gateshead) (Lab): The problem in the maritime industry is much closer to home. Around our shores, vessels working in and out of British ports are employing migrant labour—sometimes illegally and sometimes legally—and paying those workers as little as $400 or $500 a month. That is much less than the minimum wage in this country, but those vessels are working in and out of British ports, supplying goods and produce to the British market.

Kerry McCarthy: I thank my hon. Friend for raising that point. I have been talking to Nautilus International, the seafarers’ union, which has highlighted cases where people working on those ships are exploited. That is an issue in the oil sector, for example.

Stephen Doughty (Cardiff South and Penarth) (Lab/Co-op): My hon. Friend is detailing some horrific abuse. Unfortunately, I have seen examples of modern-day slavery in the agricultural sector in my constituency. Will she join me in praising the work of the Co-operative, and particularly its charter on modern-day slavery? The charter raises issues of responsible procurement in food supply chains and the need to ask difficult questions about, for example, abnormally low tenders being given to ensure that modern-day slavery is not being used in those food supply chains.

Kerry McCarthy: I thank my hon. Friend for his intervention. I chaired a joint event last night between the APPG on human trafficking and modern slavery and the APPG on agriculture and food for development. One point made powerfully was that while we want the Government and the supermarkets to act—I will come to that in a moment—we must also look at procurement. The Government could be incredibly powerful if their procurement policies made it clear that they would not source from companies that could not give absolute assurance that there was not slavery in their supply chain.

I mentioned the Thai fishing sector. The Foreign Office should be doing more to support human rights defenders such as Andy Hall, whom I have been in contact with for many years. He has exposed some of the worst practices in food producing there, starting with the pineapple sector, and I think he is now writing about the chicken sector. He has been threatened, harassed and pursued through the courts as a result, and I do not think the Foreign Office is doing enough to support him.

The examples that I have given are clearly abhorrent and illegal, but it is also unacceptably that small-scale farmers and workers producing Indian tea and Kenyan green beans—common items in our supermarkets—are earning less than half of what is needed to ensure a basic but decent standard of living. When women working on grape farms in South Africa were surveyed, 90% reported not having enough to eat in the previous month. These are things that we take for granted; a grape is, to an extent, a luxury item, yet the women producing them cannot feed themselves or their families. If buyers were prepared to pay just three cents more per melon to a producer in Honduras and less than two cents on a banana in Guatemala, that would give those workers a living wage.

A big part of the problem is the supermarket model itself. It provides us with unparalleled choice. We can buy products from all over the world, all year round, at low prices and at our convenience. Retailers are increasingly operating in challenging circumstances, under threat from the discounters and online competition, and this is leading to over-consolidation. Tesco and Carrefour have teamed up to buy products. The planned merger between Sainsbury’s and Asda would see them control more than 30% of the UK groceries retail market. They have promised that, if the merger goes ahead, they will cut shelf prices on key items by 10%, which will cause yet more downward pressure on prices for suppliers. Supermarkets now keep an increasing amount of the money their customers spend—as much as 50% in some cases.

Jim McMahon (Oldham West and Royton) (Lab/Co-op): I congratulate my hon. Friend on her leadership on this issue. On the Asda-Sainsbury’s merger, is she concerned that Sainsbury’s is withdrawing its Fairtrade brands in its supermarkets?

Kerry McCarthy: I was not actually aware of that point, so I thank my hon. Friend for bringing it to my attention. I am very concerned to hear that that is the case.

As I was saying, supermarkets now keep as much as 50% of the money their customers spend, while the share that reaches workers and food producers has fallen, sometimes to less than 5%. Oxfam’s research has found a direct correlation between drops in the prices paid by the supermarkets to suppliers and the risk of...
increasing human rights violations in supply chains. This is basically propelling a race to the bottom on wages and rights. Slavery and labour exploitation typically happen towards the bottom of supply chains, where things can get very murky and there is a lot less transparency. It is not just the cost savings that are not passed down; there is also a greater risk in that we are much more likely to see pesticide poisonings and other health and safety violations.

For example, the import price for pineapples from Costa Rica to Germany, primarily for supplying Aldi and Lidl, fell by about 45% between 2002 and 2014, despite increasing production costs. Oxfam has documented conditions on two pineapple farms in Costa Rica, which included poverty wages, subcontractors demanding monthly commissions, penalties or dismissal for workers who wanted to organise, and pesticides being sprayed while workers were in the fields.

There are other unfair practices that contravene the groceries supply code of practice’s principle of fair dealing. Fairtrade’s research into the banana sector found that banana farmers bear the cost if the retailers’ forecasts are wrong. In the worst instance, banana farmers reported receiving late changes to orders in 40 out of the 52 weeks in the year. Feedback Global has revealed the unrealistic specifications buyers use to reject produce from vegetable producers in Kenya, where on average 30% of production is discarded at farm level and another 20% prior to export—that is 50% of their produce—largely on cosmetic grounds. There is virtually no domestic market for these crops and alternative buyers cannot be found at short notice.

What can we do about this? For a start, we as consumers can do more. We can buy Fairtrade, which is the only initiative that requires a minimum price for producers and has a mandatory trader standard. We can use our consumer power to demand more of our supermarkets, using the Oxfam “Behind the barcodes” scorecard to track their progress. As the chief executive officer of Divine Chocolate has said:

“We live in times where, on the one hand, the turnover of the world’s biggest supermarket group is higher than the Gross National Income of Norway or Nigeria, and, on the other, where most of the world is dependent on smallholder producers for at least 80% of its food. Supermarkets have a responsibility to those producers, and we have more power than we think to call them to account.”

The food sector can certainly do more. In the EU, just 10 supermarket groups account for over half of all food sales. Just 50 food manufacturers account for half of all global food sales. If they act, that will make a huge difference.

Thangam Debbonaire (Bristol West) (Lab): My hon. Friend is making a very powerful and, actually, a very upsetting speech. In particular, she mentioned Kenyan bean farmers, and a lot of us thought we were doing some good when we bought those beans. Does she agree that, along with the supermarkets, we need to look at the wider catering industry, food processing and cafés, which often like to portray themselves as fair and good trading environments? Does she also agree that we need some system that enforces such regulations across the sector?

Kerry McCarthy: I very much agree with my hon. Friend. I am focusing today on supermarkets because that is where it is easiest for customers to interface and because they so powerful within the market. However, there are many big food manufacturers and others throughout the supply chain, as she says, that need to step up to the mark as well.

Chris Elmore (Ogmore) (Lab): When I was serving as a councillor, I took part in opening a supermarket in the Asda chain, and it was fascinating to talk to those involved about how they judge customer satisfaction on, for example, gluten-free or vegetarian foods. Does my hon. Friend agree that, when the giant supermarkets look at opening such stores, if customers demanded fairer trade and better deals with those they were purchasing from, those supermarkets would start responding to customer demand?

Kerry McCarthy: One point is that there is just so little transparency. A limited range of goods is covered by Fairtrade certification. It tends to cover commodities such as coffee, cocoa, bananas and so on. We need far greater transparency. During the horsemeat scandal, there were stories about lasagne selling for £1 that had traversed about 13 or 14 EU countries, with dozens of small products going into making this probably highly unappetising meal. It is so difficult to trace that, but we do need to make a start.

Stephen Doughty: I am one of the vice-chairs of the all-party group on Fairtrade. Further to the points made by my colleagues, is my hon. Friend aware that, when the giant supermarkets and others to be doing that and actively trying to deceive consumers?

Kerry McCarthy: I absolutely agree. I also think that big companies can have a Fairtrade brand that might account for 5% of its sales, but the rest of their coffee or tea does not carry that certification, so what does that say about the conditions under which that share of the market is produced?

Hugh Gaffney (Coatbridge, Chryston and Bellshill) (Lab): My hon. Friend has reminded me that, in the supermarket trade, food that is all made in the same place is given different labels for different supermarkets. We should also be looking at how that is exploited.

Kerry McCarthy: I agree. That is very much about the complexity of the supply chain and the need for greater transparency.

If the supermarkets and the big food companies act, that could make a huge difference. Oxfam has found that all the major supermarkets in the UK—Tesco, Sainsbury’s, Asda, Morrisons, Lidl and Aldi—lack sufficient policies to protect the human rights of the people they rely on to produce our food. Oxfam’s “Behind the barcodes” scorecard provides supermarkets with a rating based on their transparency, accountability and treatment of workers, farmers and women. Aldi languishes at 1%,
while Morrisons and Lidl are at 5%. The highest scoring is Tesco, at a still fairly unimpressive 23%. However, I was pleased that Tesco came along to the joint APPG meeting yesterday, and it seems very willing to try to improve that score.

There are key actions supermarkets can take, from conducting human rights due diligence in line with UN guiding principles on business and human rights to respecting living wage and income benchmarks in supplier negotiations. Needless to say, they should be paying their own staff the living wage too. Supermarkets need to end the fantasy of social audits, which are almost entirely for PR purposes. They need to engage constructively with trade unions throughout the supply chain that are working to ensure real living wages, root out bad practices and provide a route for whistleblowers—whether that is Unite and the Bakers, Food and Allied Workers Union in the UK; Nautilus, the seafarers union, which has already been mentioned; or global framework agreements with the International Union of Food, Agricultural, Hotel, Restaurant, Catering, Tobacco and Allied Workers Associations.

The Government can also do more. With the Modern Slavery Act 2015, the UK became the first country in the world to require large businesses to report on the steps they are taking to eliminate slavery from their supply chains, but there have been only 13 convictions in the past 18 months. The Government must do more to ensure that all businesses are compliant with the law, with tough financial penalties if they are not. A new evidence briefing from the Independent Anti-Slavery Commissioner and the University of Nottingham has found that just 19% of the agriculture sector is abiding by the terms of the Modern Slavery Act.

Paul Blomfield (Sheffield Central) (Lab): My hon. Friend is right to mention the role of the Independent Anti-Slavery Commissioner, and I am sure she agrees that the independence of that role is critical to its success in unrolling the strategy and holding the Government to account. The first commissioner, Kevin Hyland, who did a great job, took a strong stance in calling for enhanced application of the transparency in supply chains section, but he cited Home Office interference as one reason he has resigned from his post. The job application for his successor impedes that independence by requiring them to set a programme of work with the Home Office and to have their performance appraised by the Home Office. Does she agree that it is vital that the Minister gives us the assurance that the Independent Anti-Slavery Commissioner can operate with true independence?

Kerry McCarthy: My hon. Friend makes a powerful point, and I certainly hope that the Minister will reply to it in her winding-up speech.

As I said, only 19% of the agricultural sector is abiding by the terms of the Modern Slavery Act. By contrast, the rate of compliance with the new gender pay gap reporting rules was 87% on day one of the first year of reporting.

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for the Home Department (Victoria Atkins): I am delighted to say it is now 100%.

Kerry McCarthy: If we can get 100% on gender pay gap reporting, we ought to do an awful lot better on modern slavery reporting.

The Home Office review of the Modern Slavery Act is welcome, and I hope it will result in much-needed measures to strengthen it and its implementation. I welcome the appointment as chairs of the right hon. Member for Basingstoke (Mrs Miller) and my right hon. Friend the Member for Birkenhead (Frank Field), who unfortunately has had to go back to his constituency, where “Songs of Praise” is being recorded, otherwise he would be here.

If the Government want to lead on this issue internationally, a law of due diligence, whereby companies need to demonstrate they are actively seeking to end slavery in supply chains, would be a good place to start. A wider definition of supply chain liability is needed, so that real or feigned ignorance is not a justifiable excuse when instances of slavery are revealed. We also need better support for victims. I very much support Lord McColl of Dulwich’s Modern Slavery (Victim Support) Bill, which would extend the proposed 45 days of additional support to 12 months. We can see how victims of slavery are terrified of coming forward because of the risk of deportation.

Thangam Debbonaire: I thank my hon. Friend for giving way one more time—she is being very generous. I am interested in the point she has just made about supermarkets taking responsibility. Does she think that the onus needs to be on supermarkets, and that ignorance of slavery further down the supply chain should be their responsibility? They should be more proactive in going out there and seeking evidence that there is no slavery, rather than waiting to be caught out.

Kerry McCarthy: I certainly think that. At the all-party group yesterday, we heard from someone from ASOS, the online clothes firm, who talked about all the measures it takes. It has really complex supply chains, sourcing products from all around the world—not just finished garments, but material, zips and buttons—yet it seems to be able to do it, so I do not see why supermarkets cannot. They should be doing it on food safety and on other issues as well, so they ought to be doing it on modern slavery.

The Agriculture Bill will require more data from the agri-food sector on supply chain fairness. That will get some information out there that can be used, like the Oxfam scorecard, to put pressure on the supermarkets to change their practices. However, there is nothing in the Bill about such data being used for a legally enforced purpose. Having been a member of the Public Bill Committee, I hope we can change that. I raised this issue this morning at Environment, Food and Rural Affairs questions and I got a response from the Farming Minister about the Gangmasters and Labour Abuse Authority, but I am slightly concerned that he did not seem to link it in with discussions about modern slavery. I would hope that as a result of this debate he and the Under-Secretary of State for the Home Department, the hon. Member for Louth and Horncastle (Victoria Atkins), can have a conversation. The International Labour Organisation has said that the agriculture, forestry and fishing sector is the fourth largest sector for the incidence of slavery, so it certainly needs to be on DEFRA’s radar.
I also asked the Farming Minister in Select Committee whether he would support the EU’s unfair trading practices directive, covering the whole of the supply chain, which will extend to producers selling into the EU from overseas. Naturally, the Minister told me that the Government would prefer to deal with this on a national basis, but we do need a firm commitment that the Government will follow the EU’s lead and establish themselves as a good and responsible customer so that we do not end up losing the preference of suppliers post Brexit—why would they sell to us when they do not get the same protection they would get from selling elsewhere? Another step the Government can take is to support the adoption of a binding UN treaty on business and human rights that holds companies legally accountable for human rights violations along their supply chain.

There is another reason for holding this debate now. There are too many in this place who enthusiastically extol the opportunities of getting our hands on even cheaper food in the post-Brexit world, but that would come at a terrible price: a race to the bottom on food standards, food safety, animal welfare and environmental protections, and the continued exploitation of workers around the globe. The key message I want to get across today is that cheap food comes at a cost, and the cost is often met by the workers. Cheap food is not the solution to food insecurity. Food bank use is driven by low pay and insecure work, benefit freezes, sanctions and delays, and spiralling housing costs. Something has gone very wrong when a local advice centre tells me it has been helping a client who could not afford to eat, but she could not get to the food bank because it was only open when she was at work—at Tesco.

We also need to be cautious, as I mentioned at DEFRA questions this morning, about Government plans to bring in seasonal migrant workers to fill labour shortfalls after Brexit. Focus on Labour Exploitation—FLEX—has warned that temporary migration programmes that tie workers to a single employer would mean workers are unable to defend themselves if they are paid less than promised or if they are expected to work longer hours and in worse conditions than initially agreed.

In conclusion, I represent a city, Bristol, that was built on the back of the slave trade, the hideous and now unimaginable trade in Africans and in slave-produced commodities such as sugar, chocolate, coffee, cotton and tobacco. Bristol is now one of the leading fair trade cities in the world and at the forefront of efforts to stamp out modern slavery. Our city is home to anti-slavery organisations such as Unseen and TISCreport that are, like Mayor Marvin Rees, committed to stamping out this horrendous crime, making the commitment to be the world’s first transparent city at a time when most did not even know what that meant. Slavery is not just a terrible episode in history. Some 13 million people were captured and sold as slaves from the 15th century to the 19th century while slavery was legal, but the “Global Slavery Index” estimates that more than 40 million people live as slaves today.

When the current Prime Minister came to office, she vowed to personally work to eradicate this “barbaric evil” and “great human rights issue of our time”. But as with many promises, I fear that the Government’s ambition may be slipping. I hope the Minister can provide some reassurance today that that is not the case.

12.46 pm

Mr John Hayes (South Holland and The Deepings) (Con): Supermarkets have decimated high streets, destroyed livelihoods and distorted the food chain. The exploitation to which the hon. Member for Bristol East (Kerry McCarthy) drew the attention of the House is not an aberration and is not marginal to supermarkets; it is intrinsic to their business model.

In my lifetime—I should say my short lifetime—I remember parades of shops on council estates, like the one on which I was brought up, across the whole of the country; shops run independently by people who knew their customers and knew those who supplied them. They had an interest in ensuring that their practices were sufficiently ethical to maintain their customer base and to preserve quality relationships with their suppliers. In my lifetime, farmers and growers in my constituency could sell the goods they made to a variety of people in a variety of places. They could go to local markets. They could sell in local produce auctions. They could walk away from deals if they were not fair, reasonable and ethical. In my short lifetime—I emphasise that again, Madam Deputy Speaker—our high streets were vibrant places. Our towns and cities were made lovelier by the variety and particularity that one found there. Sadly, all of that is no longer the case. What Napoleon called a nation of shopkeepers has become a nation of automated checkouts with contactless cards. We are all worse off as a result.

I want to deal in particular with the exploitation that the hon. Lady mentioned, and which I have said is implicit in the food chain model we have created. It is inevitable that farmers and growers must sell to the handful of places available to buy their goods. A report issued in 2000 by the Competition Commission demonstrated that a business able to control as little as 8% of the market has sufficient means to engage in exploitative trading practices. The big supermarkets do not control 8% of the market or even double that. Combined, the five big supermarkets control the vast majority of the United Kingdom’s grocery market. That concentration of power, made worse by Tesco’s recent absorption of the wholesaler Booker, magnifies and exaggerates the potential for exploitation right through the food chain, with my farmers and growers in Lincolnshire unable to walk away from bad deals as they have nowhere else to sell their produce. We know what those bad deals look like: up-front payments and delayed payments for the goods that suppliers provide, and sometimes, suppliers being obliged to fund “marketing campaigns” on behalf of retailers. Payments are now delayed for an average of 45 days, which puts small and medium-sized businesses on the brink of survival, as the supermarkets routinely engage in these practices.

The Agriculture Bill is welcome. Clause 25 gives new powers to Government—thanks to the insight, will and vision of the Secretary of State for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs, no doubt—to take action against supermarkets that behave in the ways I have described. I have implored him to use those powers with alacrity and determination, for they are needed. The supermarket adjudicator, introduced when I was a Minister in the Department for Business, Innovation and Skills, has also made some progress, although I would like to see her powers extended and used more liberally.
However, we must do much, much more, because as well as the exploitative practices that the hon. Member for Bristol East raised and which I have tried to amplify, we must consider the character of our high streets. Most towns now suffer from out-of-town developments that draw people away from the small shops that remain. With footfall decreasing, fewer shops can survive, because they rely on busy town centres to attract their customers.

Hon. Members know the scene as well as I do in large parts of Britain, with boarded-up shops, boarded-up banks and decimation in many places. People who do shop at out-of-town estates are forced to drive there, as they can no longer walk or cycle to the shops. They are encouraged to buy in large volume because they visit the shops infrequently, so there is then the problem of over-purchasing and food waste. We are told that around 30% of the food purchased ends up being thrown away. Encouraging over-buying more than offsets the claim from supermarkets that they have driven prices down. They may have kept prices down, but people no longer buy what they need; they buy much more than they need and much of it goes to waste.

Kerry McCarthy: Food waste is not just about the food that has been bought; the issue exists throughout the supply chain. From farm gate to fork, between 30% and 50% of food is estimated to be wasted. A lot of it never even gets on to supermarket shelves, and that is an absolute scandal. If food waste was a country, it would have the third highest carbon footprint in the world.

Mr Hayes: The hon. Lady is absolutely right. There are any number of cases, for example, of suppliers having food rejected that they have grown to supply supermarkets, because it has not met the standard or because the supermarket has changed the volume that it requires. Much food goes to waste that was grown to meet the supermarket’s original need or requirement. That is another example of the sharp practice that I described.

The truth is that in constituencies across the country, this is the secret exploitation which dare not speak its name. Farmers, growers and food firms—primary and secondary producers—dare not say what I am saying today, because they know that if they did, they would no longer be permitted to sell their goods to the few people available to buy them. That is why the supermarket adjudicator finds it so difficult to get evidence. Even with the confidentiality that is part of her remit, people are still reluctant to tell the truth, because they so fear what the supermarkets might do in retaliation.

It is time for the Government to act. The Agriculture Bill is helpful—I was delighted when I read clause 25, as I said—but we need to think about planning reform. We need to encourage people back into town centres and to our high streets. We need to give the adjudicator additional powers to deal with these exploitative terms of trade. We need to protect the workers in supermarket businesses in the way that was highlighted by the hon. Lady, whom I congratulate on bringing this matter before the House. We also need to recognise that far from extending choice, supermarkets have restricted it. If the only place someone can go to buy their groceries conveniently and affordably is a single store in a single place, how is choice extended and protected?

The Government really need to step up, and no Minister is more capable of doing so than my great friend and Lincolnshire neighbour who will respond to this debate. I ought to pay tribute, too, to the hon. Member for Swansea East (Carolyn Harris), who will sum up for the Opposition, because she is also a friend—there is no favouritism here. I know that they will both want to use this opportunity to expose this dreadful secret, as I have called it—this thing that dare not speak its name, this exploitation at the very heart of all that supermarkets do and are.

Before I close—this case is so self-evident that its amplification demands brevity rather than loquacity—I want to say that around the corner there is another spectre: the amalgamation of two supermarkets, with Sainsbury’s and Asda coming together. I spoke a moment ago about the consolidation of the market that resulted from the takeover of Booker by Tesco. This further step would give the combined business 30% of the market. I call upon the Competition and Markets Authority, which did so little about the Booker case, by the way, and which I have written to recently, to recognise in the investigation that has been announced that further consolidation of the groceries market will be injurious to the interests both of consumers and of those who supply them, with all the ill effects for the workers and customers that have been highlighted in this debate.

Let me end—I am coming to my peroration, and I like to give notice of that so that enthusiasm can build—by saying this: two futures are available to us, and we must choose which path we take. We can once again live in vibrant, well-populated, full of eclecticism and particularity and full of choice, or we can have the dull, deadening, draining ubiquity of supermarkets, of out-of-town megastores. That choice is available to us, but we will only choose the first, to the immense benefit of the people, if we are determined to take decisive action to make that come true.

There is a cruel deception—this is an easy thing to misjudge—that the future lies in hands other than ours, that it is pre-determined, that we are somehow simply acting out a script written for us. In fact, the future can be as joyful as we choose it to be, and if it is not fixed, influenced and shaped by the people in this House, we will be failing in our duty to pursue the national interest for the common good.

12.59 pm

Sandy Martin (Ipswich) (Lab): During the Second Reading debate on the Agriculture Bill, I asked what was the point of seeking to protect our environment, animal welfare, human health and workforce rights through high standards imposed on our food creators in this country if we then allow food produced under less stringent regimes to undercut those high standards, and end up importing all our food from abroad.

Today is Anti-Slavery Day, and the Modern Slavery Act 2015 was enacted when our present Prime Minister was Home Secretary. If we are to give any traction to the laudable aims of that Act, we need to ensure that food producers, wherever they are in the world, cannot profit financially from slavery. I well recall the shock that I felt when we saw the news that Chinese cockle-pickers had been swept out to sea and drowned in Morecambe bay. Those people were virtually unpaid, and their lives...
were recklessly endangered, and ultimately squandered, by gangmasters who had no compunction about breaking immigration law, health and safety regulations and minimum wage law, all in the cause of providing cheap cockles for whichever market they were selling to.

That was a headline case, but there have been plenty of stories of workers from other countries being exploited by gangmasters working in this country. Fruit pickers, vegetable pickers and other seasonal agricultural workers have been prominent among them, and that still goes on. There are workers who are nominally paid the minimum wage, but are charged for their journey to this country and their journey to work each morning, and charged over the odds for squalid housing. All those sums are deducted from their wages at source by the agents who have recruited them and are hiring them out to the organisations for which they are working.

If we are to protect people working in this country from exploitation—if we are to ensure that everyone working in this country is paid a decent day's pay for a decent day's work—the Government must do far more to enforce the minimum wage by not just advising employers that they are breaking the law, but prosecuting and punishing them. Far more resources need to be put into investigating suspected offenders. There should be proper support for the victims of slavery and wage exploitation to encourage and enable them to act as witnesses, and there should be no easy ways to avoid the minimum wage by charging inflated rents for accommodation that is tied to employment, or exorbitant sums for transport to work.

I want our standards in this country to be something of which we can be proud, but if that is to happen, we need to ensure that we are not exporting slavery and exploitation to the third world by importing cheap goods produced under slavery conditions. Clearly the British minimum wage does not apply in other countries, but there are minimum conditions that should apply. If food is being produced through the use of indentured labour—labour provided under duress by prisoners, child labour, or even outright slavery—we have no business importing it and therefore giving financial support to the gangsters who are using those methods.

This is where the purchasing power of the supermarkets is so important. There is no excuse for them to pretend not to know or care about the conditions under which their food is produced. The big supermarkets in this country have ample resources with which to check the provenance of the food that they sell. We expect them to show due diligence throughout the supply chain in order to ensure that the food is safe to eat, and if they are doing that, they ought also to show due diligence in ensuring that it is produced fairly, without undue exploitation of the workforce.

I do not eat shellfish, but if I did, some of the stories that I have heard of exploitation in the far east, with young people being tricked, or even kidnapped, and then held as slaves to fish for shellfish on offshore platforms, would be enough to put me off. British people do not want to eat food that has been produced through the use of slave labour. British people do not want to see their fellow humans being exploited in this country either, and we want to know that those who work will be paid fairly for it.

It is time that the supermarkets realised that these things are important to their customers, and carried out thorough due diligence on all the products that they sell. I believe that they should be required to do that so that when we buy food in this country, we can know that it is not only safe, but ethically produced.

1.4 pm

**Deidre Brock (Edinburgh North and Leith) (SNP):** I commend the hon. Member for Bristol East (Kerry McCarthy) for tabling this important motion, but is it not sad that, in these supposedly enlightened times, we are still having to discuss the brutal practices of slavery?

Forced labour, domestic servitude, people-trafficking—there is nothing modem about this. It is an age-old story of individuals being dehumanised and exploited by fellow human beings.

Workers have hard-fought rights in the United Kingdom, but it is easy for a blind eye to be turned to something nasty that is happening to people further down the line: those whose labour helped to put those shiny products on our supermarket shelves. When profit alone is king, there are always unscrupulous businesses that will callously treat people as commodities. Unless there is credible action to stop it, there will always be brands that will do the shady deals and say, “Nothing to see here,” or, “Nothing to do with me.” We need to shine a light on forced labour and the exploitation of workforces, and hold the companies at the top of the line responsible, too. In that way, we can drive these sickening practices from the supply chain.

I am not just talking about the appalling cases of people trafficked into slavery, such as those we have heard about involving Burmese and Cambodian crews on Thai fishing boats. Millions of workers are forced to labour for almost nothing in appalling conditions that violate their human rights. Oxfam’s excellent research reveals the shocking poverty and human rights abuses that are behind many common products on our supermarket shelves. For example, there are South African women farmers who pick grapes for our wine but cannot even feed themselves and their families. The highest-paid supermarket chief executive will earn more in less than five days than those women do in their entire lifetimes—let that sink in. Where women are the main labourers, the risk of exploitation is even worse.

The Oxfam researchers found that less than 6% of the consumer price was reaching small-scale farmers and growers, with supermarkets capturing over half the value of the products, which is more than in the Netherlands, Germany and the United States. Profits paid in dividends had dramatically risen in the UK since the 1970s. Business models are ever more strongly focused on increasing returns for shareholders instead of looking after the interests of all stakeholders.

The Modern Slavery Act was a much-needed, welcome piece of legislation. I commend the Government for the action that they have taken so far, and the Prime Minister for her own commitment on this issue. Those, I think, are efforts that we can all support.

Some supermarkets have taken steps to identify and deal with issues in their supply chains. I note, for example, the efforts of Marks & Spencer to improve transparency with an interactive supply chain map, including information on trade union membership recognition from its primary suppliers. There are also good news stories, such as the growing success of the Fairtrade market in the UK. More agreements are
Being reached with the big supermarkets to expand their Fairtrade products, which is fantastic news, but that, unfortunately, makes the news that we have just heard about the decision of Sainsbury’s to pull out of its commitment to Fairtrade even more disappointing.

Alison Thewliss (Glasgow Central) (SNP): Does my hon. Friend welcome the efforts of the Scottish Fair Trade Forum to encourage more suppliers to take on Fairtrade, and to persuade small as well as larger businesses to supply such products in their shops?

Deidre Brock: I certainly do. I am well aware of that, having attended Fairtrade coffee mornings in my constituency for the last couple of years. It is great to see people really getting behind the Fairtrade initiative.

Clearly, as the Government recognise, the picture is patchy, and there are many issues relating to how the measures in the Modern Slavery Act are working on the ground. Encouraging transparency and fairness is simply not enough. We know that agriculture, fishing and forestry businesses are amongst the highest-risk offenders in respect of forced labour worldwide, but a year after the Act came into force, only 19% of agriculture companies were doing all that is required to comply with section 54. Even when businesses do comply, it can be seen as little more than a box-ticking exercise—very little effort is made to get to the root of the problem. Companies must be made, not just encouraged, to comply. As all who have suffered at the hand of austerity since 2007 would agree, light-touch regulation is not enough.

The discovery of slavery in supply chains should hit businesses where it hurts most, and highlighting their names of those who take a stand, and holding liable those who have suffered at the hand of austerity since 2007 is perhaps epitomised in our minds by the Morecambe bay tragedy involving the cockle-pickers.

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We have heard much today—it was mentioned by my hon. Friend the Member for Edinburgh North and Leith (Deidre Brock)—about Oxfam’s important “Ripe for Change” report, which presents new and alarming evidence of the suffering faced by women and men behind the supermarket barcodes. While it is positive that UK supermarkets help to create jobs in developing countries, that cannot blind us to the outrage of human and labour rights abuses in the supply chains of the foods we eat. My hon. Friend reminded us of that in powerful terms.

Oxfam reminds us of forced labour aboard fishing vessels in south-east Asia, poverty wages on Indian tea plantations, and the hunger faced by workers on South African grape farms, as was well set out by the hon. Member for Bristol East. We see gross global inequality and escalating climate change, which must be increasingly unsustainable.

The fact is that in this global market, supermarkets choose their products from all over the world, moving between countries and suppliers as the seasons change, with all sorts of fruit and vegetables being sold at all times of the year. But cheap food and all-year-round choice come at a price, and that price is that the big retailers exert huge and intense pressure on suppliers to cut costs while at the same time demanding the highest quality.

Prices paid to suppliers continue to be squeezed, as the right hon. Member for South Holland and The Deepings set out, while there is inadequate support for small-scale farmers and workers from Governments in producer countries, and those factors have increased the risk of human and labour rights violations. This manifests itself in such practices as exploitative child labour and unpaid female labour, and if we could see them for ourselves every day as we bought our produce, it would make us feel very uncomfortable. As the hon. Member for Ipswich pointed out, supermarkets must know how their suppliers operate, and if they do not know, they should.

We all want our grocery bills to be as low as possible, but how many consumers are truly aware of the real cost of cheap groceries? All too often, the cost is that those who produce the food on our supermarket shelves are themselves trapped in poverty and face brutal working conditions, with many going hungry. Oxfam has indicated that, sadly, Tesco, Sainsbury’s, Morrisons, Asda, Lidl and Aldi are increasingly squeezing the prices they pay suppliers, with less and less of the price we pay at the till reaching the small-scale farmers and workers who actually produce the food we eat.

Alarming, of the supply chains Oxfam looked at, none enabled people to earn enough for even a basic standard of living, and in some cases, including the production of Indian tea and Kenyan green beans, it was less than half of what they needed to get by, as the hon. Member for Bristol East reminded us. Women face routine discrimination, often providing most of the labour for the lowest wages. More than nine out of 10 of the grape workers in South Africa and seafood processors in Thailand surveyed—most of whom were women—said they had not had enough to eat in the previous month, and several Members, including the hon. Member for Bristol East and my hon. Friend the Member for Edinburgh North and Leith, have pointed that out. We have heard from a number of Members about how the cheap food we buy in supermarkets comes at the cost of squeezing
prices paid to suppliers, which then creates huge suffering for the women and men who supply this food, trapping them in poverty.

Kerry McCarthy: All today’s speeches have been excellent and I thank Members who have attended the debate.

We can draw a comparison with the clothes sector. We reached a point some years ago when people started realising that if we can buy a pair of jeans for £3 in a supermarket, something must be wrong, with somebody somewhere down the line being exploited if that product could be produced so cheaply. Does the hon. Lady agree that we need to do the same with our food and start questioning why it is so cheap?

Patricia Gibson: The hon. Lady is absolutely right. The debate around how we change the culture of our cheap clothing and cheap food is about making sure that our consumers are as well informed as they can be when they go out to do their shopping, whether to buy clothes or groceries. When the public see the cost behind the cheap price, many are moved to change how they shop and what they buy.

Across 12 common products including tea, orange juice and bananas, UK supermarkets receive almost 10 times more of the checkout price than the small-scale farmers and workers who produce them. The UK supermarkets’ market share rose from 41% in 1996 to nearly 53% in 2015 and, as the hon. Member for Bristol East demonstrated, this represents a race to the bottom in terms of what is paid to suppliers.

Oxfam and the Sustainable Seafood Alliance Indonesia examined the working conditions in prawn processing plants and exporters in Thailand and Indonesia respectively, which supply some of the world’s biggest supermarkets, including the six UK supermarkets. Workers described forced pregnancy tests, unsafe working conditions, poverty wages, strictly controlled bathroom and water breaks, and verbal abuse.

Supermarkets should lead the way ethically if positive change is to happen in our food supply chains. That is why Oxfam’s new supermarkets scorecard, which rates and ranks the most powerful UK supermarkets on the strength of their public policies and practices to address human rights and social sustainability, should be welcomed. These challenging benchmarks, based on robust and international standards, and widely recognised best practice on transparency, accountability and the treatment of workers, small-scale farmers and women in supply chains, will allow our consumers across the UK to make more informed choices. They will help to effect change in supermarkets’ practices and encourage them to address the suffering in their supply chains. As we have heard, when consumers have more information, that affects how they purchase and what they buy.

Sandy Martin: Does the hon. Lady agree that while it is true that supermarkets should, ethically, carry out this due diligence, something in legislation requiring them to do so would be more powerful?

Patricia Gibson: Absolutely. In the past, what has worked best is a carrot-and-stick approach. The Government can lay down regulations and insist by law that certain things are done by supermarkets in the supply chain in this country, but the power of the consumer cannot be overestimated. This is a two-pronged approach, therefore, and we need both these approaches.

We need firmer regulation to protect the rights of farmers and workers. We have modern slavery legislation, but it is important that we continue to be committed to challenging all practices that put people at risk of suffering within our supply chains by convening other nations against modern slavery, as the UK has done at the UN for the last two years.

Engagement with the ongoing independent review of the Modern Slavery Act 2015, ensuring the promotion of transparency within global supply chains, and a commitment to the UN guiding principles relating to business and human rights are essential. Supporting the UN binding treaty on business and human rights is required, too, and I will be interested to hear what the Minister has to say today. As the hon. Member for Bristol East said, many who fear a race to the bottom in food standards and who raise concerns about these matters think they will only be exacerbated post Brexit.

We can do more to mitigate and ease the suffering on a global scale in our supermarket supply chains. We should do what we can, and as a matter of urgency, I am sure that today’s debate has raised the profile of this issue, and I hope that consumers will begin to exert pressure of their own in the choices they make, but we need to do more to ensure that supermarkets themselves are confronted with the part they play in this suffering and abuse of workers and small-scale farmers in some of the poorest countries in the world. That is how real change will come, but the UK Government must play their part, and I am keen to hear the Minister’s response as to how her Government will address the very serious issues raised today.

1.20 pm

Carolyn Harris (Swansea East) (Lab): I am grateful to the Backbench Business Committee, and to colleagues for their excellent speeches. What we have lost in quality we have certainly gained in quantity—or the other way round. [Interruption.] Or maybe not.

Human trafficking and modern slavery are thriving throughout our international economy, from our grapes and our coffee beans to the tuna we put on our sandwiches. The cost to human life and basic human rights is truly astonishing. Only 12% of Thai fishermen have said that they have fair working conditions, and an estimated 50% of Thai fishermen are known to have been trafficked. As we know, this is not just happening overseas. In Cornwall, in Kent and on the Cambrian coast in Wales, our car washes, our nail bars, our construction sites and the restaurants that we visit are all hotspots for the evil traffickers.

Oxfam’s recent report, “Ripe for change: ending human suffering in supermarket supply chains”, highlights the scale of slavery throughout the food and goods industry. In the UK, the grocery sector is one of the most diverse and sophisticated in the world, worth nearly £185 billion a year. Supermarkets have delivered low prices and year-round choice to many consumers in the UK, but they have done so by using their huge buying power to exert relentless pressure on their suppliers to cut costs while meeting exacting quality requirements, and they often use a range of unfair trading practices to do so. The depression of prices paid to suppliers, coupled with inadequate Government support in producer countries for small-scale farmers and workers, has increased the risk of human and labour rights violations and, as Oxfam has found, driven greater global inequality.
Mr John Hayes: The hon. Lady is absolutely right. Does she agree that supermarkets have also extended the food chain so that it is now much less likely for someone purchasing a good to know its source? They pay lip service to traceability, but in a greatly extended food chain, exploitation is much more likely to occur.

Carolyn Harris: The right hon. Gentleman is absolutely right, and I totally agree with him.

Taking Indian tea and Kenyan green beans as examples, the research by Oxfam found that workers and small-scale farmers earned less than 50% of what they needed for a basic but decent standard of living in their societies. The report also found that the gap between the reality and a decent standard of living was greatest where women provided the majority of the labour. In South Africa, over 90% of surveyed women workers on grape farms reported not having enough to eat in the previous month. Nearly a third of them said that they or a family member had gone to bed hungry at least once in that time.

In Thailand, over 90% of surveyed workers at seafood processing plants reported going without enough food in the previous month. In Italy, 75% of surveyed women workers on fruit and vegetable farms said that they or a family member had cut back on the number of meals in the previous month because their household could not afford sufficient food. In less than five days, the highest paid chief executive at a UK supermarket earns the same as a woman picking grapes on a typical farm in South Africa will earn in her entire lifetime. That is simply not good enough.

Large UK supermarkets lack sufficient policies to protect the human rights of the people they rely on to produce our food. Supermarkets need to act on human and labour rights, support a living wage and radically improve transparency of their own human rights and those of their suppliers. This is vital if our supermarket supply chains are not to be a breeding ground for trafficking. We must be persistent on this matter. We need the Government to enforce compliance with the Modern Slavery Act 2015. They must set out how they will measure decent work practices, reform company law and support the adoption of a binding United Nations treaty on business and human rights.

Judith Cummins (Bradford South) (Lab): My hon. Friend is making an excellent speech. Section 54 of the Modern Slavery Act is a very welcome provision, but does she agree that its effective enforcement will require a central register of all the companies that are required to comply?

Carolyn Harris: I most certainly do, and I look forward to hearing the Minister’s response to that point. The Modern Slavery Act places a requirement on companies with a turnover of £36 million and above to publish a statement outlining what steps they are taking to tackle exploitation in their supply chains. However, the Act does not require companies to take action; it requires only that they make a statement saying what they are doing.

Kerry McCarthy: Perhaps I am pre-empting what my hon. Friend is about to say, but is it not also a problem that the companies’ statements sometimes say virtually nothing? They just have to tick a box to say that they have made a statement. They do not have to show that they are actually doing something to root out slavery in their supply chains.

Carolyn Harris: Exactly. There is also a huge lack of information held on companies that have provided a statement, with a significant amount of companies providing no statement at all. Only 50% of the agricultural companies that fall within the scope of the Modern Slavery Act’s corporate reporting requirement have published a modern slavery statement, and only 38% of those statements were compliant with the requirements of the law, meaning that overall only 19% of the agricultural sector is abiding by the terms of the Act. Section 54 as currently implemented is not fit for purpose and has significant limitations. This is due to the inability to monitor compliance by businesses and no assessment of the quality of modern slavery statements being published. The Welsh Government have put together an ethical code of practice on supply chains and the Co-operative party has launched a modern slavery charter which looks at local council supply chains. These are both progressive moves, but it takes leadership at national level to ensure consistency in this approach.

The Government recently announced a new two-year pilot scheme to bring temporary migrant workers from outside the EU to work in the UK agricultural sector. The stated aim of the pilot is to ease labour shortages in the sector during peak production periods. Lessons from the UK’s previous seasonal agricultural workers scheme and similar temporary migration programmes in other countries show how these types of schemes can create conditions in which modern slavery and labour exploitation can thrive. If the Government are going to introduce migration policies that will increase risks to workers, they must also take the necessary steps to mitigate and prevent such risks in order to ensure that modern slavery does not flourish in Brexit Britain. They must ensure that labour inspectorates have the resources to ensure they can inspect this programme and protect workers, and temporary workers must be provided with information on their labour rights and given support to raise cases of abuse.

We need to work together to end human trafficking and labour exploitation, and we must eradicate modern-day slavery. Companies must be held to account for the ethical impact of their activities, particularly where poor business practices directly contribute to the severe exploitation of workers. Currently, the traffickers are winning. Vulnerable adults and children are being exploited on an industrial scale across the UK and internationally. It is time to take action. We must stop this practice now.
independently, but I am pleased to note that the Select Committees on Business, Energy and Industrial Strategy and on Environment, Food and Rural Affairs wrote a joint letter in early May to the CMA raising concerns about the impact that the merger would have on the grocery supply chain and asking for details on the approach of any investigation. The Secretary of State for Business, Energy and Industrial Strategy also wrote to the CMA in May to stress the importance of considering the possible impact on the supply chain, among other competition-related issues.

Mr John Hayes: I am grateful to my hon. Friend for her complimentary remarks, which were delivered with her usual style. Will she also consider making the groceries code statutory? The code is voluntary and is largely ignored. In my judgment, a statutory code would protect suppliers, with all the beneficial effects that that would have right down the supply chain.

Victoria Atkins: I hesitate to take responsibility for all the work of Government, as I fear that that is a matter for BEIS, but I will ask the relevant Minister to write to my right hon. Friend. Having listened to his speech carefully, I absolutely understand why he asked that question.

The hon. Member for North Ayrshire and Arran (Patricia Gibson) and the hon. Member for Swansea East both raised the important issue of women in supply chains, which I obviously take an extra interest in given my responsibilities as Minister for Women. Women and girls are often among the most vulnerable people working in global supply chains. They are more likely to be subject to sexual, mental and physical abuse, both within the workplace and while travelling to and from workplaces, and sadly they are regularly paid lower wages than their male counterparts. The Department for International Development is working to tackle the issue with its flagship initiative, the Work and Opportunities for Women programme. I know that acronyms are not allowed in the MOD, but the DFID acronym for that is WOW, and the programme will collaborate with British and global businesses, providing access to the latest expertise on women’s economic empowerment to improve outcomes for women and enable them to build more resilient, sustainable and productive supply chains.

Turning to transparency in supply chains, it is an uncomfortable truth that forced labour exists in the supply chains of products on our supermarket shelves, which is simply unacceptable. I welcome Oxfam’s research, which shines a light on the suffering of workers in supermarket supply chains. Agriculture and fishing is a particularly high-risk sector that is estimated to account for 12% of forced labour globally. Supermarkets and businesses in food supply chains clearly need to do more, but the truth is that no sector is immune from the risks of modern slavery. Almost all businesses will face the risk of modern slavery somewhere in their supply chain, which is why the world-leading transparency in supply chains provision in the Modern Slavery Act 2015 requires large businesses in the UK to publish an annual modern slavery statement.

Thousands of businesses are stepping up to the challenge and have published statements detailing the action they are taking to tackle modern slavery in their supply chains. Many are demonstrating their commitment by partnering with experts, changing their purchasing priorities...
and reporting transparently about what they have done. Companies such as the clothing company ASOS and the Co-op are leading the way in being open and transparent about where they have identified modern slavery risks and what actions they have taken to put them right and prevent the problem from happening in the future. For example, the Co-op’s modern slavery statement disclosed that it had identified a case of modern slavery on a supplier’s farm in Nottinghamshire. As a result of Co-op working closely with its supplier, the police, the Gangmasters and Labour Abuse Authority and the Salvation Army, the victim was safeguarded and the perpetrator jailed for eight years.

I am also pleased to see that more and more companies, including Marks & Spencer, Unilever and Tesco, are signing up to the employer pays principle and taking steps to ensure that workers in their supply chain do not pay exploitative recruitment fees, which can often lead to debt bondage. Although large companies that meet the relevant turnover threshold are obliged under the Act to issue a statement on their supply chain, we are finding evidence that that is having a trickle-down effect on smaller businesses that do not reach the turnover threshold. It is a positive thing that companies are being required by their larger business partners to meet those standards so that the larger businesses can issue a statement.

I am conscious that, although thousands of businesses are taking their responsibility seriously, too many are still publishing poor-quality statements or are failing to meet their basic legal obligations. Today, the Home Office has begun to write directly to the chief executive officers of all 17,000 UK businesses believed to be within the scope of the Act. We have made it clear what their obligations are and how they can meet them. There are no excuses for non-compliance, and those businesses that continue to flout their legal obligations should understand that they can expect to face far tougher consequences.

Members have rightly said that this is about not just companies publishing statements, but the quality of those statements. Having written to those companies, the Home Office plans to audit the statements at the end of this financial year and to name non-compliant companies after that date. That is a significant development in transparency.

We will also be establishing a transparency in supply chains advisory group, with experts from the modern slavery sector and from the business community, to help inform our approach to tackling slavery in public and private sector supply chains. Later this year, we will be revising the business guidance on modern slavery reporting, and businesses can now register on the modern slavery contacts database for guidance and resources to help them report effectively.

Of course, the independent review of the Modern Slavery Act, chaired by the right hon. Member for Birkenhead (Frank Field), my right hon. Friend the Member for Basingstoke (Mrs Miller) and a noble baroness, will consider how the transparency provision is working and what measures we can take to ensure it is as effective as it can be. I hope that that shows the Government’s direction of travel on this important issue.

The crucial action for these companies to take is to set meaningful targets, report on them and strive to make year-on-year progress in addressing these risks. We recognise that identifying and addressing modern slavery can be a complex task, which is why we are strengthening the guidance we are giving to businesses. We are also funding projects run by experts, including the Ethical Trading Initiative and Stronger Together, to support UK businesses in training their suppliers and addressing the risks in their global supply chains.

The Independent Anti-slavery Commissioner is an important part of this analysis, and hon. Members have mentioned the commissioner’s independence. As I have said in other debates, I have always found Mr Hyland to be incredibly independent and independent-minded, and I very much enjoy working with him. To reassure the House on this important appointment, we remain absolutely committed to the commissioner’s independence, and we are considering how this role can be further strengthened as part of the modern slavery review.

The Government recognise the importance of labour market enforcement and have continued to strengthen their response to exploitation in the UK labour market. We have created the role of director of labour market enforcement, who is responsible for producing an annual strategy that provides an assessment of the scale and nature of non-compliance in the labour market and sets strategic priorities for the three main enforcement teams in this field: the Employment Agency Standards Inspectorate, the Gangmasters and Labour Abuse Authority and HMRC’s national minimum wage team.

Sir David Metcalf took on the role in January 2017 and published his first full annual labour market enforcement strategy in May 2018. The Government are considering Sir David’s recommendations for the three enforcement bodies and will publish their response shortly.

We have also given the GLAA powers, equivalent to police powers, to investigate serious cases of labour market exploitation across the entire economy in England and Wales. Just last year, the GLAA conducted more than 100 operations, leading to more than 100 arrests for suspected labour market offences across a range of sectors, including construction, hand car washes and hospitality. The GLAA has also done some excellent work in partnership with businesses to raise awareness of the signs of modern slavery and to share good practice within the agricultural, construction and textiles sectors. For example, the GLAA has partnered with Sainsbury’s to deliver training sessions to its suppliers so it can better identify and manage risks in its supply chain.

Just outside my constituency in Lincolnshire, the GLAA has partnered with Boston College, an important college in our local area, to help educate young people not just to spot the signs of modern slavery in and around the fields of Lincolnshire, but to know their rights when it comes to their own careers and jobs. We need to get the message out that young people should not feel they need to accept jobs that pay poorly or on which the conditions are not acceptable. This is part of a programme of education that I hope will be followed up across the country.

Colleagues have rightly mentioned the seasonal agricultural workers pilot, and it is a key objective of that scheme to ensure that migrant workers are adequately
protected against modern slavery. The GLAA will license the scheme operators, and the Home Office and the Department for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs will closely monitor the scheme to ensure that operators adhere to the stringent requirements we have set to ensure workers’ safety and wellbeing, including paying the national minimum wage as a minimum.

The Government recognise that we have a responsibility to use all the levers we have to tackle this crime. As for any business, there are risks of modern slavery in the goods and services procured by the Government and the public sector. We are already leveraging our buying power and requiring bidders for central Government contracts to certify that they are compliant with the transparency requirement in the Modern Slavery Act. In June, the Cabinet Office announced that the Government’s biggest suppliers will be required to provide data and action plans to address key social issues, including modern slavery. We are stepping up our activity to address modern slavery risks in our own supply chain, and we will be supporting the wider public sector to take action.

Of course, modern slavery is an international, indeed global, issue that requires a global response, which is why the United Kingdom is playing a leading role in tackling modern slavery away from our shores. At last year’s United Nations General Assembly, the Prime Minister launched a global call to action to end modern slavery, and more than 80 countries endorsed that call to action and pledged their support.

Building on that work, at this year’s UN General Assembly, the UK—in partnership with the US, Canada, Australia and New Zealand—launched a set of principles for combating modern slavery in supply chains. The principles set out the steps countries should take to prevent exploitation in both public and private sector supply chains. We are sharing lessons from our world-leading transparency and supply chains legislation with other countries, and Australia has looked to the UK for our experience and is now introducing legislation similar to ours.

We are also strengthening our bilateral relationships to tackle this crime. Those who take an interest in this area will know that, sadly, Albania features highly when it comes to the number of people referred to the national referral mechanism. Last week, I met the Albanian Deputy Minister and committed to an ambitious £2 million package to support victims to rebuild their lives and to deter vulnerable people from falling into the hands of traffickers in Albania. Today, we are launching the second round of our modern slavery innovation fund, which will make £5 million available for new approaches to tackle modern slavery globally, and just yesterday the UK held its day of action for the Amina project, a cross-Europe project to prevent child migrants from becoming child slaves.

Colleagues asked about the draft EU directive on unfair trading practices, and although the UK supports the broad aims of the draft directive, it is important to ensure that the measures in it are proportionate and appropriate for each member state, so we have argued for greater discretion for member states in how they implement the provisions.

I have also been asked about the UN guiding principles on business and human rights, and we are proud to have been the first country in the world to produce a national action plan responding to those guiding principles. As for the UN treaty, we are engaging in this process as part of the European Union and we are obviously carefully considering our approach to this proposed legally binding instrument.

To mark Anti-Slavery Day, buildings and businesses across the country will be lit in red tonight to raise awareness of this scourge on society, including buildings in Whitehall, Marble Arch in London, Cardiff City Hall—I apologise to the hon. Member for Swansea East—and the Etihad stadium in Manchester. That will raise awareness and give the message that this problem affects us all and that we should take an interest in this incredibly important issue.

To eradicate this crime from our communities and economy, Government, businesses and society need to work together. We should continue to be ambitious in our expectations and approach. No production line, however far reaching, should ever involve the exploitation of human beings, and we are determined to ensure that the rights of those who grow and produce our food are valued and defended.

1.52 pm

Kerry McCarthy: I will be brief. I thank the Minister for her response. She covered most of the points that were raised and I am sure she will go away and check whether there are any other points to which she could respond in writing. I have sometimes seen Ministers come along to the House and read from a piece of paper, showing no sign of having listened to the debate that they have just heard, so I thank her for not taking that approach and for giving a thoughtful and considered response.

I also thank everyone else who has contributed. As people have said, there might not have been a huge number of speakers, but everyone who contributed spoke with great passion and clearly felt very strongly about the issue. I am also grateful to have had the opportunity to speak at far more length than I am usually able to in this place, in that we often end up being called when a seven or six-minute limit has become a three-minute limit.

The food sector is a particular problem because of some issues that have been outlined today, and I urge the Minister to speak to her colleagues, particularly those in the Department for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs and in the Department for Business, Energy and Industrial Strategy who are responsible for the supermarket sector. We need to discuss this not just in the context of modern slavery and trafficking issues in general, but with a specific focus on how the food sector operates and how that gives rise to some of the horrific abuses we heard of today. I would be grateful if she did that.

Question put and agreed to.

Resolved.

That this House is concerned about the practice of modern slavery and the exploitation of labour in the supply chains of supermarkets in the UK; notes this week marks world food day and anti-slavery day; recognises the global leadership that the Government has shown in tackling modern slavery in supply chains in the Modern Slavery Act 2015; and calls on the Government to help ensure that steps are taken to protect the workers and farmers who produce food.
World Menopause Day

1.54 pm

Martin Whitfield (East Lothian) (Lab): I beg to move, That this House has considered world menopause day 2018.

As always, I thank the Backbench Business Committee for facilitating the debate and all those from across the House who supported the application, including my hon. Friend the Member for Swansea East (Carolyn Harris). Today is World Menopause Day, the day that the International Menopause Society, in collaboration with the World Health Organisation, has designated for a focus on the menopause—from hot flushes through to heart health and everything in between. It was only in July 2018 that the hon. Member for Redditch (Rachel Maclean), who is in her place, discussed her experiences with the menopause in this House. I want to take this opportunity to congratulate her on her honesty and, I must say, her bravery in raising the matter in this Chamber. It is my hope that we will no longer have to note or make newsworthy such honest representations and statements.

Discussions and understanding of the menopause should be commonplace and should go almost unnoticed but not unactioned, which is the important point. Many women spend a third of their lives postmenopausal, often at the peak of their careers and still with huge plans and ambitions for the future. In fact, as the pension age for women increases to 68, our society is demanding that women have those careers and those ambitions. Women could now spend well over 20 years of their working lives living perimenopausal and postmenopausal. Three and a half million women over 50 are employed in the UK, and 80% of them will experience notable changes due to the menopause. Recent research has found that 50% of working women reported finding work difficult due to the menopause, and 10% give up work altogether as a result.

I embarked on a new career in my 50s as a newly elected MP. I was privileged to enter this House of Commons just over a year ago, and I cannot imagine embarking on a new career struggling with some of the symptoms that my female counterparts experience and suffering them without help and support. Indeed, it is unthinkable that society would ask men at the height of their careers to simply tolerate the symptoms, to carry on and, actually, to do so quietly. Why should women? All too often, the menopause is seen as something women need simply to cope with. They are afraid to discuss the symptoms openly with their friends, family and, sometimes most importantly, work colleagues, because they are afraid of being undermined and perhaps marginalised. Some 70% of women do not discuss their symptoms at work, a third do not visit their GP and many are not comfortable with disclosing the real reason they need in order to work. I agree with the motion when it says that this must change. The menopause is an occupational health issue that rests on the desks of managers—male as well as female managers, and managers who are frequently younger than the person who presents before them. There needs to be education about this so that it can be dealt with sensitively but positively, as it will affect 50% of our population at some stage.

Gender equality is not just a women’s issue, it is an issue for society as a whole. We should all wish to live in a society that is fair and equitable for all. There is nothing equitable about a large proportion of our workforce being forced to suffer these health issues in silence. Women are often not comfortable disclosing these difficulties to managers, particularly if they are younger and particularly if they are male. Women still sometimes require time off work to deal with the symptoms, and many are not comfortable with disclosing the real reason for their time off, so it goes unnoticed by employers.

The menopause should be recognised as, among other things, an occupational health issue. With all due respect, employers have been far, far too slow to take on board the requirement to recognise those who are experiencing symptoms. Today is World Menopause Day and a number of things are being asked for, all of which are based on the simple hashtag that has been adopted today: #makemenopausematter. It is a simple request, and it shows, we need to educate not just the general population but health providers in particular so they understand what is being presented.

Just yesterday, a colleague from the Scottish Parliament, Monica Lennon MSP, lodged a motion requesting “equal access” to the menopause clinics that exist up there. I compliment her and the unions for their work up there. They raise the issue that employers have been slow to recognise that those experiencing menopausal symptoms may need special consideration. For too long it has been a private matter. As a result, it is rarely discussed. Many managers will have no awareness of the issues involved, which means that many workers feel they have to hide their symptoms and are less likely to ask for the adjustments they need in order to work. I agree with the motion when it says that this must change. The menopause is an occupational health issue that rests on the desks of managers—male as well as female managers, and managers who are frequently younger than the person who presents before them. There needs to be education about this so that it can be dealt with sensitively but positively, as it will affect 50% of our population at some stage.

The menopause should be recognised as, among other things, an occupational health issue. With all due respect, employers have been far, far too slow to take on board the requirement to recognise those who are experiencing symptoms. Today is World Menopause Day and a number of things are being asked for, all of which are based on the simple hashtag that has been adopted today: #makemenopausematter. It is a simple request, and it spans schools and education, the workplace and our health professionals, who have a duty and obligation to understand the symptoms presented to them by women who are finding the menopause frightening and challenging and who often find it difficult to discuss the matter within their own families. Today is an opportunity to look at that and address the educational needs that the whole of society requires.

I stand here introducing this debate as a man, and it has to be said that it is time for men to show their solidarity and to break a taboo about talking about the menopause. I ask every man in this place, every man who is watching on and every man in the UK—let me
go further and just ask all men—to be brave enough to have the guts to say, “Can you tell me? Can you explain? Will you please share?” I ask them to do that while listening with sympathy and empathy. Sadly, I am all too convinced that if the menopause affected men, it perhaps would not be the problem it is today and we would not be having this debate—it would have certainly been first raised in this House before July 2018.

Kerry McCarthy (Bristol East) (Lab): My mother has six daughters, the eldest of whom turns 55 tomorrow—happy birthday, Claire. The youngest turns 44 at the end of the month—happy birthday Aimi. I am clearly intervening just so that I can say happy birthday to my sisters in the House. I get plenty of discussion about this issue at home, but I want to thank my hon. Friend for making the point that men need to talk about it, too. He has been brave in bringing this debate forward today.

Martin Whitfield: I am grateful for that intervention. It is true that men need to discuss this, but not dominate. It is also important that they listen. I have often stood here and been critical of social media, but if we examine social media today, we see that the support for World Menopause Day out there is very positive. A huge amount of work is being done; there is a huge amount of medical and academic research, and it is good to see people drawing attention to it. Today has also been an opportunity for women to share their experiences on television, radio and social media, which in itself is a huge step forward in breaking the taboo, and it is for men to listen.

Alison Thewliss (Glasgow Central) (SNP): I commend the hon. Gentleman for bringing this debate to the House. He is making some very good points, but I just want to ask that we do not lose sight in this debate of the fact that women who are going through the menopause have enormous amounts to contribute, because women who are going through the menopause have enormous amounts to contribute, and employers should not see it as a barrier and as an excuse to leave work. We should have facilities and methods of support—it does not take a lot to provide those. I know some of my colleagues have fans, but here we are in 2018 unable to cool or heat buildings to a point where they are acceptable to work in. These are the simple things that would make a huge difference to people’s lives. As I have said, these are people who are still expected to contribute to society, to be driven and to make changes and take steps up—and why shouldn’t they? The menopause should not be a blockage to that.

I am aware that others wish to speak, and it would be unforgivable for a man to steal all of their time. I would just like to finish by saying that I ask all men, myself included, to take up the challenge of discussing the menopause with the people close to us. We should discuss it openly at home and in the workplace, so that for once our mothers, wives, sisters and friends do not need to feel that they suffer in silence.

Madam Deputy Speaker (Dame Eleanor Laing): I was surprised and very pleased when I saw that a man had tabled this motion, and the hon. Gentleman has been courageous in standing up and saying what he has said. I am also delighted that we have a male Minister answering this debate. We all look forward to hearing what he has to say, too. We are making breakthroughs in this place that people would never have imagined.

2.9 pm

Rachel Maclean (Redditch) (Con): Thank you so much, Madam Deputy Speaker. You speak so much truth and I am glad that you have put those words on the record from your position—they will carry a lot of weight.

I pay tribute to the hon. Member for East Lothian (Martin Whitfield), who gave an absolutely brilliant and heartfelt speech that I know will resonate with all the women throughout the country and around the world who are watching this debate. They will be so happy that he, as a man, is championing this issue. If only every man was as warm, empathetic and well informed as he is, we would not be having this debate. I look forward to working assiduously with him and colleagues from all parties to reach that position, which I very much believe we will.

As has been said, we have already tackled many taboos in this place and in our society, and this is genuinely one of the last taboos. It is now okay to talk about mental health, and that is a really good thing. A lot of celebrities now talk about their mental health. It is all over social media, in the press and on the television. People are backing that, and people are coming forward to say, “It’s okay not to be okay.” Somehow, however, menopause is still left out, and this debate is a fantastic chance to put that right.

I started on this journey pretty much as the hon. Member for Lothian described—

Alex Chalk (Cheltenham) (Con): East Lothian.

Rachel Maclean: East Lothian—I am so sorry. Please forgive me.

I was 50 when I was elected, so I was of course well within that perimenopausal/menopausal age myself. I did not conform to the menopause stereotypes, as I shall touch on later in my speech. There is so much ignorance
[Rachel Maclean]

out there. It is generally believed that someone has to suffer from the key symptoms, such as hot flushes and night sweats—that that is basically all that menopause is—but menopause is so much more than that. It is not just hot flushes and night sweats, and I am living proof of that. I have never had a hot flush or a night sweat, but I am most definitely menopausal. My symptoms revolve around quite debilitating migraines, sometimes on an almost daily basis when I am not able to manage the stress of this job. As was rightly said, this is an incredibly stressful job and an incredibly stressful workplace, and we cannot just take a day off and go and lie down in a dark room to sleep off a migraine, much as we all might like to, even if we are not menopausal. Many women working in other walks of life who are perhaps at the peak of their careers, or who work in any stressful environment, are not able to get the support that they need.

We saw a shocking demonstration of the ignorance in society from no less a figure than the Governor of the Bank of England, Mark Carney, who not long ago compared the economy with the menopause. He said that we are suffering a menopausal economy. He came back and defended that, saying that he did not mean it or whatever, but his casual use of those words demonstrated a fundamental lack of awareness of a leading figure in our country. It is not right. With that phrase, he made me so angry—and not only me but many other people. That made me think that I could not sit there and not be a voice for all the women out there who do not have the privilege of being able to raise the issue in this place.

So, I had my personal journey, and I started to look on social media and do some more research to educate myself. As the hon. Member for East—[HON. MEMBERS: “Lothian.”] I will get there in the end!

Alex Chalk: The East Lothian question.

Rachel Maclean: Yes; thank you.

The hon. Member for East Lothian said that social media plays a big part in this, and it is where I started my journey. From my research and conversations, I recognise that millions of women in this country do not feel listened to at this time of their lives. That was where my campaign started—from a place of wanting to represent those women.

We still have a long way to go. Last night, when I was voting in the Lobby, wearing this #MakeMenopauseMatter badge, I was approached by a very senior colleague, who shall remain nameless. His comment was: “Why—are you having a hot flush, dear?” That was said to my face. My goodness, does not that illustrate how we need to raise awareness? This is not a women’s issue; it is a society issue. It is for everybody, because every man works with a woman, is related to a woman or lives with a woman. People cannot just denigrate and belittle experiences that can be incredibly difficult for women to push through. I pride myself on being quite a feisty person. I am not afraid to say what I think and I definitely told that Member what I thought about that comment. I said, “Please, come to the World Menopause Day debate and find out why that comment is completely inappropriate and, hopefully, learn a bit more.” I am delighted to say that he is in a minority. I pay tribute to the many male colleagues from all parties who have been supportive of the debate and this issue.

I am not asking for a lot—perhaps I am, but I do not regard it as a lot. I regard these things as quite basic. The hon. Member for East Lothian has already touched on the key issues, the first of which is the workplace. We are in an extraordinarily unusual workplace where there are issues for not only the people who work here, but Members ourselves, but there are many more workplaces up and down the country. It is not too much to ask—is it?—for workplaces to be better prepared for women going through this change of life. The process can be extremely positive if women get the support, understanding and empathy that they need from their colleagues, there is absolutely no reason why they cannot make this into a fantastic time in which they can move on to a new chapter of their lives, and flourish and contribute in different ways.

Martin Whitfield: The hon. Lady is making a powerful speech. Does she agree that it is strange that our high schools and education system are perfectly set up to support young people through their teenage years, when substantial changes are going on in their bodies, and to launch them into their careers, but society seems unable to have the same sympathy and empathy at a different part of someone’s career?

Rachel Maclean: Yes, I completely agree. The hon. Gentleman must be psychic, because he has made a point that I was going to make. Before I do so, however, I want to speak about the workplace.

Let me pay tribute to some organisations that are doing an absolutely fantastic job in this regard. I have had quite a lot of contact with West Midlands police through various women who have championed this issue in the workplace. There is a lady called Lesley Byrne—Lesley, if you are watching, keep going! Yvonne Bruton has been running menopause awareness workshops for the police. Imagine the West Midlands police—a very male-dominated and, in many ways, traditional organisation. Female police officers are incredibly brave to say, “I have these experiences. I am not supported and I need adjustments to my working patterns.” They are working through the issues and finding ways to support their female colleagues. At the end of the day, we need good police officers and we need them to stay in the police force, to be motivated and to progress to higher levels.

That work is absolutely brilliant, and there is no reason why every single police force in the country could not talk to West Midlands police, find out what they are doing and disseminate the information among themselves. Indeed, there is no reason why other organisations cannot have a menopause policy, just as they have policies on childcare and maternity leave. It does not cost anything; it is a question of saying, “We’re here and we will listen to you if you need support.” That is my first ask.

My second ask is about education, which the hon. Member for East Lothian just spoke about so eloquently. We of course talk to young girls and boys—I presume this still happens; it is a long time since it happened to me—about puberty, periods, where babies come from and so on. We educate our young people about all those important issues to equip them for life and relationships; why can we not educate them about what happens at the end of their reproductive lives? It is very simple. I spoke
to a male colleague earlier who said, “I have no personal experience of the menopause, so how can I talk about it?” I said, “Well, okay, your mother went through it,” but then we did not talk to our mothers about these sorts of things. This needs to come into the school curriculum and to be part of what schools are talking about. Let us look at how we can do that, because surely it is not that hard.

The third aspect of my campaign is around access to advice in GP surgeries. This is where we really do need to do more. I have been absolutely inundated with people contacting me. I have heard quite horrific stories from women who did not get the treatment that is medically proven to be effective, which is hormone replacement therapy. HRT is available on the NHS and actually advocated for women in the guidelines of the National Institute for Health and Care Excellence. However, it seems that there is—I don’t know—a lack of awareness, a lack of information and a lack of empathy among GPs who are not prescribing HRT for women when they need it. I have heard story after story from women who went to their GP, saying, “Look, I am suffering these symptoms.” Again, the reason might be that they are not having hot flushes or night sweats, but they have the other symptoms that are associated with the menopause, and they are just not getting that treatment. GPs are sending them away. Why do some women battle for years to get HRT?

I am delighted to say that the Under-Secretary of State for Health and Social Care, my hon. Friend the Member for Thurrock (Jackie Doyle-Price), has already met me to discuss this issue. We very much hope to move things forward with the all-party group on women’s health, which is led by the hon. Member for Dewsbury (Paula Sherriff), and obviously with any other Member who wishes to take part. We really need to do more.

If I may, I will draw my comments to a close by quickly paying tribute to a few campaigners who have given me so much support and information.

**Kerry McCarthy:** The hon. Lady has been very brave in speaking out. So far our focus has been on dealing with the symptoms and the problems. Has she had the opportunity to look into whether diet-related changes could help to alleviate some of those symptoms rather than just medical solutions? In Japan and China, for example, there seems to be much lower incidence of these things, it can negatively impact on their ability to form a relationship, to have a relationship with their partner and a whole host of other things. All those things can be connected to the menopause. More importantly, they can be alleviated with the right information and support. Why should women not have the right to a happy, healthy later chapter of their life in all aspects, including in their intimate life? I believe in that very passionately and think that it is so important.

Very quickly, let me mention Detective Chief Inspector Yvonne Bruton, who has pioneered this work in the West Midlands police. Liz Earle, a health magazine and beauty product founder, is also a passionate champion of this issue. Obviously there are many more people involved, but I do not have the space to mention them. Needless to say it is a space that is well populated by passionate women who are just keen to share their knowledge with others.

I will draw my remarks to a close. I could probably talk for hours, but I am aware that I am detaining the House. Let me thank again the hon. Member for East Lothian, my hon. Friend the Member for Glasgow East (David Linden), I am so delighted that he contacted me and that he applied for the debate. I very much look forward to the Minister’s closing remarks.

2.25 pm

**Marion Fellows** (Motherwell and Wishaw) (SNP): I also congratulate the hon. Member for East Lothian (Martin Whitfield) on securing this important debate—it seems to be a day for Scottish accents. I am delighted that he felt able to bring forward such an important matter. It was a real pleasure to follow the hon. Member for Redditch (Rachel Maclean) who courageously outlined some of her own experiences and made a very wide-ranging and powerful speech. She advocated and highlighted so many other women who are doing their very best to give this subject the prominence that it most assuredly deserves.

I am delighted to be speaking about World Menopause Day and about this important subject. My hon. Friend the Member for Glasgow East (David Linden) is, I believe, even more delighted. He is quite young, and I think that he thought that he would be replying to this
[Marion Fellows]

debate instead of me. My daughter is extremely apprehensive about the content of my speech, as she frequently accuses me of oversharing. She need have no fears today—or at least not too many.

I have been there. I have done that and I have got the T-shirt, and that really does cover my experience of menopause. I started early and it seemed to go on for quite a long time. I remarked earlier to you, Madam Deputy Speaker, that my mother was born in 1919, so how I was raised very much reflected the way that she was raised by a mother who was born in the 19th century, so no one talked about it.

I have some vivid memories. I was teaching in a further education college as I was going through quite a large part of my menopausal experience. Standing in front of 25 bored teenagers, I asked, “Is it hot in here, or is it just me?” I was told, “No, it’s just you”, to which I responded, “Well, I’m opening the windows anyway.” It really was good that I was in charge of that class.

Another story that, in many ways, illustrates how the menopause used to be discussed is through the brilliant comic creations of Les Dawson, Cissie and Ada. They only ever mouthed the words, “The change” when discussing their menopause experiences as well as those of other women. I am very glad that that is no longer the case. World Menopause Day is an important opportunity for women to speak out about their real experiences of the menopause, contributing to breaking the taboo around both the menopause and women’s reproductive health.

As we should all know, the menopause can have a significant psychological and physical impact on women, and it is vital that these effects and symptoms are taken seriously by health professionals and society at large and that women can access the right support. Women’s health issues often do not come under the spotlight owing to ongoing taboos around women’s health, and it is time for women—younger and older—to speak out in support of each other to raise awareness. The days when women are literally put outside the tent or igloo when they are past child-bearing age are long gone, but we still have these taboos. We must work hard to speak about our experiences and contribute to breaking these taboos.

This year’s World Menopause Day is about recognising the impact that the menopause can have on women’s sexual wellbeing. Both during and after the menopause, it is not uncommon for women to experience some sexual dysfunction, which can have a severe impact on their relationships, self-esteem and wider mental health. It is so important that women going through this can access the right support to reassure them that it is totally normal and they are not alone. Sharing experiences with other women is also extremely important, and women speaking to other women about their experience is to be encouraged, but we must engage with the wider world too. As I have said, the menopause can have a significant psychological and physical impact on women, and it is vital that these effects and symptoms are taken seriously by health professionals.

Rachel Maclean: I commend the hon. Lady’s bravery in speaking from the heart and from her personal experience. She is talking about the psychological impact of the menopause. Does she agree that women sometimes report that they do not feel like themselves at all—that they experience depression and anxiety, and often feel effects on their memory, making it very difficult to perform in the workplace and often leading to their leaving work early?

Marion Fellows: The hon. Lady is absolutely right, and this is a wonderful occasion to highlight such things and to motivate women to speak more frankly, because every woman has a different menopause. We all have to accept that and to share our experiences so that no one feels that they are the only one going through this.

The Scottish National party and the Scottish Government support World Menopause Day. Through the Scottish Primary Care Information Resource, the Scottish Government support general practice to identify patients with conditions such as osteoporosis and cardiovascular disease, which are clearly and directly associated with the menopause. We need to anticipate health needs for women in this situation and ensure the best possible care for them. There are some NHS menopause clinics in Scotland, located in Dumfries and Galloway, Fife, Grampian, Lothian and Tayside. In other areas, health boards provide menopause help through general practice and specialist referral if needed. The British Menopause Society really wants to encourage that, because doctors and other health professionals also need to be trained in how to talk to women and encourage them to talk about their symptoms.

There are also some great initiatives at a local government level. For example, South Lanarkshire Council is today launching its menopause policy, and it is to be very much commended for that. The council worked out that 68% of its workforce are women, who could go through the menopause at any point, and it sees it as its duty to take care of these women and to allow them to talk to managers. In fact, they are training managers properly to help with this issue. It can be very difficult for some women to talk to a younger man, as the hon. Member for East Lothian has mentioned.

South Lanarkshire Council’s plan includes the provision of fans for women to manage hot flushes and the ability to take time out when coping with low moods. There is also a requirement to ensure that women experiencing menopause have easy access to toilet facilities. This is not difficult; it is something that all employers should be doing. Women will have somewhere to rest or to go for a little while if they feel tired due to a lack of sleep caused by things such as hot flushes, and if they are suffering from anxiety at this time, they will also be able to access the employee counselling services. This is a great initiative that I wholly commend, and it should be emulated by other employers right across the country. This is exactly the kind of proactive support that both the public and private sectors should be adopting.

A BBC survey earlier this year found that 70% of respondents do not tell their bosses that they are experiencing symptoms when they are going through the menopause. I certainly did not, but then I am well beyond menopause and have seen quite a large variety of changes in how we speak about women’s issues throughout my lifetime, so I am really happy to be able to speak on the subject today. Employers must take the lead in creating a safe environment for women to speak up if their symptoms are making their work difficult.
It is actually better for employers to do that, because if they treat women with consideration at this time in their lives, they will get the best possible work out of them.

**Martin Whitfield:** Is it not the case, though, that a woman should never feel obliged to tell her employer? She should work in an environment that is open and sensitive enough for that to be understood, so that she has the confidence to share that, rather than it being an employment requirement to announce it.

**Marion Fellows:** Yes, I agree; but it does have to be a two-way process. Employers have to create workplaces where people feel confident talking about mental health issues and about the menopause.

Women’s health issues often do not see the spotlight due to ongoing taboos, and it is time for women—younger and older—to speak out. Women are often expected to put up and shut up about the symptoms associated with the menopause or periods, and to feel that talking about it is inappropriate or just moaning, when it is clear that this attitude is just thinly-veiled sexism. The fact is that the menopause and periods, as well as other hormonal conditions such as polycystic ovary syndrome, can have a really debilitating effect on women day to day.

It is great to see fantastic initiatives such as the menopause cafés mentioned by the hon. Member for Redditch that are now up and down the country after they were started by Rachel Weiss in June 2017 in her home city of Perth in Scotland. Weiss was reportedly inspired by “Newsnight” presenter Kirsty Wark’s documentary on the menopause, in which she talked about her own experience. This was a fantastic and brave project that no doubt touched many women across the UK who felt that their experiences were given a voice.

I draw the attention of the House to an article by Mandy Rhodes, the editor of Holyrood Magazine and columnist of the year. She has written, much more eloquently than I could, about some of her experiences, saying:

“One of my funnier moments in life was going to a menopause support group—a bit like an AA for women of a certain age—where one woman confessed she had no menopausal symptoms but was there to make friends. Why would you even do that? The idea that you might want to seek out new friends, from among a group of women who were in the middle of a hormonal-induced”—

expletive deleted—

“storm that had likely helped alienate them from all their own friends and family, smacked of a certain kind of desperation. But that is where this can take you…Over the last 20 years, many barriers have been broken down regarding a whole range of issues that impact on our working lives, including gender, race, physical and mental health. And whilst people feel more comfortable opening up about some of these issues, there are others that remain taboo. The menopause and the symptoms associated with it are, for many women, that last taboo. And it’s something of a paradox that on the journey women have travelled towards equality, that that same generation of women”—

Mandy’s generation, who are younger than me, it has to be said—

“who were at the fore of getting their voices heard in the fight for gender equality, are now, in middle-age, silenced by a uniquely female condition that has done more to disempower them than any male chauvinist could ever do. Many women live a third of their lives post-menopausal, often at the peak of their careers and still with big plans. And so, dealing with it…matters to us all.”

I echo that quotation in its entirety and recommend that hon. Members read that article, which is well written, personal and effective.

2.39 pm

**Carolyn Harris** (Swansea East) (Lab): I congratulate my hon. Friend the Member for East Lothian (Martin Whitfield) and the Minister on their bravery, and I say to every man in the Chamber today: welcome to the sisterhood.

Some 49.6% of the population worldwide are women, which equates to close to 3.8 billion of us, and with the vast majority of women—in the developed world at least—living way beyond menopausal age, it is about time this issue was taken seriously. For too long the menopause has been one of two things: a taboo subject that women do not dare to admit they are suffering from, or the punchline of a joke that is actually anything but funny.

Most women will experience the menopause at some time in their lives, and the severity of their suffering varies greatly. About 25% of women are lucky enough to barely notice any changes to their body or experience any of the well-documented symptoms, but for others the menopause can be an unbearable time—stressful, debilitating and completely life changing. Yet many women are completely unprepared for this phase of their lives, which is something that we desperately need to change for future generations. We need to be educating our children—boys as well as girls—so that they understand the impact the menopause could one day have on their lives and relationships.

The Government’s draft sex and relationships education guidance includes advice on teaching young people about menstruation, but it makes no mention of the menopause, which is just as important and often more difficult. Will the Minister ask the Department for Education, as part of its consultation, to consider extending the guidance to include teaching on the menopause? In doing this, we could help to educate the next generation and put an end to the lack of knowledge around the menopause, which is having a hugely detrimental effect on those suffering today.

Also having a detrimental effect is the limited training given to GPs on this subject. Too many women struggle when doctors either do not recognise their symptoms, do not prescribe hormone replacement therapy—because they are relying on inaccurate and outdated information—or incorrectly diagnose those symptoms as depression and subsequently offer the wrong medication. This needs to change, and the Department of Health and Social Care needs to play its role and work with patients, experts, the NHS, the Royal College of General Practitioners, medical schools and all health professionals to better educate them about the menopause.

The NICE guidelines on the menopause were first published almost three years ago, yet many doctors admit that they are either not aware of them or have not read them. Women are therefore relying on the chance that the GP they visit is one of those who has. Healthcare should not be a lottery. Every woman suffering the effects of the menopause is entitled to the same quality of care, but the quality of that care in the UK at the moment needs serious attention. Current treatment options for women are woefully poor. Referrals to NHS menopause...
[Carolyn Harris]

clinics take up to six months because of the limited number of places—the result of the ongoing cuts to services. For many women unable to take HRT, particularly those who have had breast or gynaecological cancers, there is no support at all.

It is not just medical support we are here to talk about. In the UK, the average age women reach the menopause is 51, but about one woman in every 100 experiences early menopause owing to medical conditions, treatment or surgery. The loss of fertility as a result can be devastating for some women, and their psychological health is as affected as their physical health. These women need to be offered counselling as well as advice on how to maintain their long-term health, which can be affected by early oestrogen depletion.

I have heard cases of women going into debt to fund appointments with private doctors and gynaecologists because they cannot access the care that should be available to them on the NHS. Even more worryingly, the Samaritans’ 2017 report on suicide figures shows that the highest suicide rate for women is for those aged between 50 and 54. It cannot be coincidence that the age of menopause is 51. I find it deplorable that in this country something that affects so many people is so underfunded and misunderstood.

It is not just the treatment of the symptoms that needs serious attention. Life does not stop for women when they reach the menopause—I am testament to that—even if they are suffering from crippling side effects, and for many this means continuing to work. Women are working in greater numbers than ever, making up 47% of the UK workforce. About 4.3 million of these employed women are aged 50 or over, and this number is set to increase over the next few years. With studies showing that menopause symptoms can have a significant impact on attendance and performance in the workplace, employers need to start looking at what they can do to help these women and improve their own productivity.

Rachel Maclean: Does the hon. Lady also agree that it is in those businesses’ and organisations’ own interests to retain these members of staff, whom they have trained and invested in over many years, and who have so many skills and so much knowledge?

Carolyn Harris: I do, and I was just coming to that. Employers have a duty of care to all their employees. While no respectable company would even consider running their business without a maternity policy, very few will have given any thought to the introduction of a menopause policy. Simple adjustments, such as relaxed uniform policies, flexible working conditions and temperature control in offices, could have a huge impact on a woman’s decision to remain in work. It is a win-win situation: employers would benefit from retaining valuable, trustworthy and experienced employees, saving money on sickness cover and training new staff, while women would find it easier to cope with the physical symptoms of the menopause. With simple adjustments, such as being able to travel outside rush hour or to wear cooler, less restrictive clothing, they would also feel valued and supported in their professional roles, which in turn would help with the psychological barriers associated with the menopause.

Yet current figures show that two thirds of women going through the menopause say they have no support at all in their workplace. Some 25% of women say they have considered leaving their job because of it, and one in 10 actually ends up handing in her notice. Women in our emergency services, nurses, frontline retail staff and office workers—in fact, women from all sectors of industry—are leaving the workplace owing to a lack of support from their employers. These are not small businesses, but massive national and global companies. We need big business and workplaces to take this seriously.

Many unions are already championing the call for a menopause policy. An excellent example is the Union of Shop, Distributive and Allied Workers, which I have worked with, and the very wonderful Julie Bird, who has encouraged Tesco to set up pilot menopause support groups. The scheme started in Swansea and is now being rolled out across the south-west.

Nottinghamshire police was the first force in the country to introduce a menopause policy that includes flexible working and lighter uniforms. The hon. Member for Motherwell and Wishaw (Marion Fellows) talked about local authorities. I am pleased to say that I have just received a message informing me that my own local authority, City and County of Swansea—I think it knew I would want to say this—is going to introduce a menopause policy.

Martin Whitfield: These discussions can take place in local authorities, unions such as the CWU and the GMB, and employers such as the civil nuclear constabulary. This does not cost a lot of money, but it does require understanding.

Carolyn Harris: People need to talk. We must take the best practice from these examples, share them with other employers and ensure that menopause guidelines become compulsory for all businesses.

On this World Menopause Day, let us educate children—girls and boys—within the school curriculum so that for future generations the menopause ceases to be a taboo subject or a joking matter. Let us improve public understanding of the menopause and its symptoms so that women no longer feel that they need to suffer in silence. Let us ensure that our medical professions know how to diagnose and best treat these symptoms so that women’s experiences are less painful and less distressing. Let us pledge to work towards a mandatory menopause policy within workplaces so that women can carry on with a normal life, however severe their symptoms may be. On this World Menopause Day, let us make a commitment to make a difference.

2.50 pm

The Lord Commissioner of Her Majesty’s Treasury (Nigel Adams): I congratulate the hon. Member for East Lothian (Martin Whitfield) on securing this very important debate on World Menopause Day. This is a very welcome opportunity to discuss, and raise the profile of, the menopause. Is it not encouraging that a man has come to this Chamber on World Menopause Day and introduced this debate? Who would have thought, a couple of years ago, that that would happen? Who would have thought that a male Minister would be responding to this debate? Well, a week ago, I did not
think I would be doing that, but it has been an absolute privilege for me to listen to the contributions made here today.

It is fantastic to see the hon. Member for Motherwell and Wishaw (Marion Fellows) in her place. She talked about how nervous her daughter was about what her speech might contain. I can tell the hon. Lady that there are those who are very nervous about what my speech might contain, not least in the Adams household, and also in the Whips Office. As Members can see, I am surrounded by Whips today, so I am going to stay on message, especially if I am to stay in the sisterhood referenced by the hon. Member for Swansea East (Carolyn Harris).

I am here today on behalf of the Under-Secretary of State for Health and Social Care, my hon. Friend the Member for Thurrock (Jackie Doyle-Price). She has responsibility for women’s health and would very much have liked to be here to discuss a topic that she is incredibly passionate about. She has taken a very close interest in women’s health, including the menopause, and I know that she will be watching this debate.

The debate has provided us with a number of positive opportunities. First, we, as Members of Parliament, can play a role by helping to raise awareness of the menopause and by encouraging people to have more open conversations about this topic. This is a very significant life stage for every woman, as we have heard, and it has been all too rarely discussed in the House. Today, we have this opportunity to put that right.

Secondly, this debate gives us the opportunity to reflect on the positive things that employers and the health system are already doing to support women who are suffering from menopausal symptoms. More women are likely to have a better experience of the menopause if we share and promote the best examples of existing support.

We also have the opportunity to discuss what more needs to be done. We know, for example, that there are inconsistent levels of awareness around the menopause, and that that reflects a history of stigma attached to the issue. The benefits of tackling stigma head on and having the right menopause support in place are clear. That is the right thing to do for women who are suffering from adverse symptoms or who feel unable to have open conversations about how they are feeling.

Openness, as we have heard, goes for men as well as women. It is important that we improve how we educate men about the menopause for the benefit of their partners, relatives and colleagues—and, crucially, for the benefit of their own understanding. There is also a strong argument based on economic inclusion. Our national workforce is ageing, and positive action by employers will benefit employee engagement, productivity and retention.

We cannot stress enough that the menopause is a natural part of ageing and will be experienced in one way or another by every single woman. As we have heard from several Members, every woman will experience the menopause differently, and the types and severity of symptoms can vary. The menopause can occur naturally or be triggered or accelerated by medical interventions such as some surgeries or cancer treatments. The menopause can have physical and non-physical symptoms, but both can cause discomfort and, in many cases, social embarrassment. There are clear consequences for wellbeing. Women experiencing troublesome menopausal symptoms report lower health-related quality of life and greater use of healthcare services than women without symptoms.

Let us look at the numbers. There are more than 3.5 million women between the ages of 50 and 65 in employment in the UK. One in four women in the workplace is going through or has gone through the menopause. Over half of those women report that they experience symptoms that impact their work. The number of women over the age of 50 continues to grow, and the employment rate for women in the UK has never been higher. Women go through the menopause at a life stage when they are often dealing with demanding responsibilities such as work, caring for elderly relatives and dealing with teenage and adolescent children. Difficult symptoms can really add to the challenges of life.

No two menopauses are exactly alike. That is why the guidance produced by NICE recommends adopting an individualised approach at all stages of diagnosis, investigation and management of menopause. NICE also recommends that information on menopause is given in different ways, to encourage women to discuss their symptoms and needs.

Hormone replacement therapy can be an effective way of relieving many menopausal symptoms, as well as preventing osteoporosis. Usually, women may start HRT as soon as they begin experiencing menopausal symptoms, and their GP can advise on the different types of HRT that are available. However, HRT is not always the most suitable treatment, and women can discuss alternatives with their GP. Psychological interventions can be helpful for symptoms of anxiety or for those suffering from low mood. When making judgments about treatment, healthcare professionals can draw on advice from the British Menopause Society, a specialist society affiliated to the Royal College of Obstetricians and Gynaecologists.

But we can always do more. I know that the Mental Health Minister, my hon. Friend the Member for Thurrock, is leading work on improving women’s health and their experiences of healthcare. Her work partly focuses on raising awareness and breaking taboos—we have heard that word many times this afternoon—around common health morbidities, such as problem periods and incontinence. She is working closely with the Royal College of Obstetricians and Gynaecologists to achieve that. I know that one of her concerns is that women’s experience of the diagnosis and treatment of common gynaecological issues is not always what it could be. The all-party parliamentary group on women’s health pointed out in its report earlier this year, and I am sure that the Minister will have more to say about that when she returns to the Commons.

For many women experiencing the menopause, the best help often comes from other women. Services can build on that support so that women can make lifestyle choices that will help to give them a better experience of the menopause, including stopping smoking, exercising regularly and eating healthily. Partners in the healthcare system can also offer support. Menopause Matters is a website that provides up-to-date information about the menopause and treatment options, as well as hosting a forum for women to discuss their experiences of the menopause. The Daisy Network is a charity that provides information and support specifically for women who are going through premature menopause.
As has been mentioned several times this afternoon, we also need to look to workplaces as a source of support for women with menopausal symptoms. Many women report that they feel they do not have the opportunity to have open conversations with their employer about menopausal symptoms at work. That needs to change—I am specifically targeting these remarks at male managers in the workplace. This has to change. If two men can get up in the House of Commons and talk about the menopause, male managers in the workplace should be doing exactly the same.

We know from a 2017 review of the effects of menopause transition on women’s economic participation that the menopause is not well understood or provided for in workplace cultures, policies and training. Sources of guidance are available for employers who want to do more to support women with menopausal symptoms. The Faculty of Occupational Medicine has produced a factsheet and infographic on menopause and the workplace, as requested by the chief medical officer in her 2014 report on women’s health. It contains practical guidance for employers on how to improve workplace environments for help to relieve most of the menopausal symptoms. It stresses the importance of regular, informed conversations between managers and employees.

It can often be important for managers simply to acknowledge the menopause as a natural stage of life and reassure women that their employer is open to making adjustments that they may find helpful. Equally, some women may not be comfortable discussing their symptoms with a manager, and access to occupational health can also be very valuable. Specific actions that employers can take to help women experiencing menopausal symptoms include considering changes to working patterns or responsibilities, providing employees with sources of information about the menopause, and challenging taboos and negative expectations about the menopause.

There are good examples of employers—we have heard one or two in this excellent debate—who have taken action to make their workplaces menopause-friendly. We have heard from my hon. Friend the Member for Redditch (Rachel Maclean), who takes a really close interest in this issue. She spoke so passionately this afternoon, as she has done previously in this House. She highlighted the example of the West Midlands police, which provides tailored support that helps women to build their confidence and stay in the workplace. As the hon. Member for East Lothian mentioned, she has spoken openly and bravely on this subject in the Chamber on several occasions. I know she is also working closely with the Under-Secretary of State for Health and Social Care, my hon. Friend for Thurrock.

I want to respond to the question my hon. Friend the Member for Redditch posed about GPs not prescribing HRT on some occasions for women who need it. HRT can help to relieve most of the menopausal symptoms. The guidelines from NICE—NG23 on the diagnosis and management of the menopause—recommend HRT as part of an individualised approach to treatment and management, and women must be able to access the treatment they need to manage such symptoms effectively.

My hon. Friend, like the hon. Member for Swansea East, correctly mentioned teaching children about the menopause in schools, which is absolutely critical. The Government are making relationships education compulsory in all primary schools, sex and relationships education compulsory in all secondary schools and health education compulsory in primary and secondary state schools. The Department for Education has launched a consultation on the draft guidance and regulations, which closes on 7 November. I am sure my colleagues in the Department for Education will have heard the well-qualified remarks made this afternoon.

The draft guidance currently does not mention the menopause explicitly, but at primary level it includes teaching about puberty, menstruation and changes to the adolescent body, and at secondary level pupils will be taught about sexual and reproductive health and wellbeing, including fertility. The underpinning focus in these subjects is to equip young people to develop positive attitudes to health, relationships and wellbeing both now and as they progress through adult life.

Martin Whitfield: Does the Minister agree that when there is teaching about fertility in high school or secondary school education, the fact that the menopause is not mentioned almost plays into the taboo he mentioned earlier? Such a discussion is not had, and our children are therefore not getting a full picture or understanding of what is going to come to most of them.

Nigel Adams: I agree with the hon. Gentleman. It is absolutely crucial to have teaching about puberty, periods and reproductive health, which provides crucial opportunities for schools to refer to the menopause. I had no idea when my mother was going through the menopause, which was referred to as “the change”. She was very, very poorly. I remember being in the living room—my dad was at work—when the doctor was called. My mother was 50 years old and having a really bad experience. She was taken off to a mental institution. She was carted out of the house and ended up in what can only be described as a Victorian asylum. I am really glad that things have moved on in that regard—this was some time ago. It is absolutely crucial that we get to children early enough to make sure they understand the causes of a condition that affects every single woman.

Turning to the brilliant and characteristically brave speech by the hon. Member for Motherwell and Wishaw, she referred to the fact that every woman has a different type of menopause. That is absolutely correct. She talked about breaking the taboo around menopause and women’s health. The Under-Secretary of State for Health and Social Care, my hon. Friend the Member for Thurrock, is leading work on improving the health of women and their experiences of healthcare. That work is partly focused on raising awareness and breaking taboos around common health morbidities, including problem periods and incontinence, not just the menopause.

The hon. Member for Motherwell and Wishaw also talked about sexual wellbeing during the menopause. It is important that women experiencing menopause have access to support and advice on that. It is common for women to lose interest in sex around the time of menopause, but treatments are available. We have heard that HRT often helps. If it is not effective, testosterone supplements can be offered.

The hon. Lady also rightly talked about the importance of the workplace. The hon. Member for Swansea East also wisely focused on that area. Workplace policies
that take the menopause into account can benefit both women and their employers. The Government commissioned an evidence review into the menopause, which was published last July and highlighted the important role that employers can play in supporting women. Following that, the Women’s Business Council developed a toolkit for employers of all sizes, which enables employers to make the right adaptations to physical workplace environments, supporting flexible working and raising awareness to tackle this issue.

I want to close by restating the importance of approaching the menopause as a natural and normal stage of a woman’s life, while recognising that, as we have heard, for many women that life stage comes with some incredibly challenging symptoms. It is essential that all employers and health professionals are fully informed and ready to provide women with the best options for treatment and support. The right thing for individuals is also the right thing for our economy.

We have had a fascinating and fantastic debate this afternoon. It is important that we continue to speak openly and confidently about the menopause, so that embarrassment does not prevent women from accessing treatment and support where necessary. I thank all hon. Members for their brilliant contributions and for this opportunity to mark World Menopause Day.

3.8 pm

Martin Whitfield: This has been a fascinating debate. As one of the two men here, I extend the hand of friendship to the Minister. We have survived the discussion, so any man can survive it. I would also like to take the opportunity to thank him for sharing his personal experience in a very moving part of his speech.

I would just like to pick up on two elements of the debate very quickly. One is humour. It can be used to hurt and as a punchline. However, as we heard in a lovely extract from Holyrood magazine, it can also be used to open up a discussion that is so very important.

I again thank the hon. Member for Redditch (Rachel Maclean), and I would particularly like to speak to her colleague who said that we did not talk to our mothers about this. To quote from earlier on, Madam Deputy Speaker, this is a place where breakthroughs can be made. I think we have made a breakthrough today. It is a breakthrough that we should all, men and women, continue.

Question put and agreed to.

Resolved.

That this House has considered world menopause day 2018.

BUSINESS OF THE HOUSE

Ordered.

That, in respect of the Northern Ireland (Executive Formation and Exercise of Functions) Bill, notices of Amendments, new Clauses and new Schedules to be moved in Committee may be accepted by the Clerks at the Table before the Bill has been read a second time.—(Andrea Leadsom.)
that the service could reasonably be regarded by my constituents as unsatisfactory, in terms of the number of trains that were serving those commuting to London.

The second blow to local rail users was the long period of industrial action that followed the introduction of driver-only operation on the Southern network. While, of course, all services across the franchise were affected, the Redhill line once again took the brunt of the cancellations on the emergency timetables that were used on strike days. Moreover, Redhill and Merstham stations, which were not served by the fast line—the so-called Quarry line—were, and are, frequently bypassed to enable delayed trains to travel more quickly from Horley to East Croydon and vice versa, so that they could catch up when delays had been inflicted on them. That means that my constituents are the ones who are not being served by the trains by which they would otherwise expect to be served.

Both the planned May 2018 Gavia Thameslink Railway timetable and its introduction have added insult to injury. Indeed, they have caused both insult and injury to an already injured travelling public, whose quality of life has now been assaulted for a period longer than the United States spent as a belligerent in the second world war. In November 2014, David Scorey, who was then GTR’s passenger service director, spoke at a public meeting organised by Reigate, Redhill and District Rail Users Association—I was there, and I have the honour to be its president—and publicly stated that the service from Redhill would be significantly better than it was in 2012. However, the new timetable has resulted in a further diminution of the services available to Redhill line users, in terms of both service frequency and journey times. There are now no direct trains from Redhill to the south coast, including Brighton, and no direct services from Reigate to London Bridge, a key commuter route.

In 2012, during the key two-hour morning peak, there were 15 trains to London. By 2018, that figure had been reduced to 12, which constituted a reduction in peak service—a drop from 112 coaches to 104. There was also a significant reduction in the number of seats. The new trains have about 90 fewer seats: the old 12-coach class 377s had 754 seats, and the new Class 700s have 666.

Anyone who is lucky enough to get a seat at Redhill on a train that has travelled all the way up from the south coast will be largely unable to work, because most of the tables have been taken away. I know constituents who are not by any means grossly obese—they look like any other ordinary citizens—but who can no longer fit into those seats, and will therefore choose to stand anyway. It seems that all these issues arise, and then along comes a bright new train, and the bright new train itself produces a worse service—it has fewer, harder seats, and is less compatible with the work that people want to do on the way to their workplaces.

If we cause people to spend more time commuting and then make it more difficult for them to use that extra time to work on the train, we have had a serious impact on the quality of life. Moreover, I realise that the decisions about rolling stock were made some time before the Minister took up his post, but I cite it as yet another reason why rail users in my constituency are hurting.

Although the new timetable restored and extended Redhill to London Bridge services through Thameslink, following the London Bridge upgrade cuts, it did not restore the fast trains that formerly took 25 to 27 minutes from Redhill, the fastest of which now take 31 minutes in peak hours. The service from Redhill to Victoria was significantly reduced from seven trains between 7 am and 9 am to just four. Furthermore, those trains now take 39 minutes, whereas in 2012 the 0703 took 30 minutes. From neighbouring Earlswood, the 0718 service that took 43 minutes in 2012 has been replaced by trains taking 51 minutes. Off-peak and evening scheduling to and from Victoria has also seen journey times increased from 28 minutes in 2012 to 38 minutes in the new timetable. This is, by any standard, a very significant reduction in service quality.

Under the Thameslink contract specification for train services, most stations were given a minimum journey time to London. For example, Brighton has 62 minutes guaranteed in the peak and 56 in the off-peak, but Redhill route stations are among the very few absent from getting any such guarantees of minimum journey times, and thus we now have increased journey times to both Victoria and London Bridge in the new May 2018 timetable. I can only speculate as to the reasons why those stations were omitted, and I suspect that it has something to do with their position on the line, as their being the halfway point down to the Brighton line might give the managers of the rail service greater flexibility to be able to deliver on other service delivery points. Again, I would be grateful to understand the reason for this. Why did my constituents not get minimum guaranteed journey times in the way that most other rail users did?

In November 2017, the Reigate, Redhill and District Rail Users Association gave its members an opportunity to add their voice to these concerns, and a petition was raised, signed by over 2,000 local rail users, to ask the Department for Transport and GTR to redress this weakening of services, which directly contradicted the promises made by David Scorey on behalf of GTR in 2014 and caused what I believe are unacceptable cuts to Redhill services while the majority of the Brighton main line maintained a reasonable service. Reigate, Redhill and District has subsequently suffered inordinately from the chaos following the introduction of the new timetable, enduring more cuts and cancellations during this time than other local stations. To add insult to injury, following the new timetable disruption, passengers from Reigate station, who are forced to travel via Redhill to connect to Thameslink services to London Bridge as there are now no direct Reigate to London Bridge services, have since been excluded from the GTR enhanced passenger compensation scheme, despite suffering all the inconvenience caused during the timetable introduction.

The Minister was kind enough to receive me last week and explain why the Department had taken the position that it was not going to move on the compensation issue. All I can say is that that decision has been received with enormous disappointment, and of course it is in the context of a rail service that has been endured by local people, rather than one that has served their lives in the way we would all have hoped.

I now want to turn to the central issue. There is an opportunity to address all these issues. One would hope that the substantial investment from the ministerial
team and the £300 million that the Secretary of State has secured, in addition to the London Bridge works, to sort out the lines north of and around Croydon, will deal with an important bottleneck that has been the driver of much of the service difficulties over many years. When that is associated with the major investment into London Bridge, it becomes an almost catastrophic pinch point. I can see that the Government investment will give the opportunity, some years hence when the investment is completed, to produce better service provision, and, one would hope, to address the timetable issues.

I want to register how unhappy my constituents are about the timetable issues. When the opportunity comes to make serious improvements, after the Minister and his colleagues have addressed the capacity constraints, will he ensure that my long-suffering constituents are first in the queue for those major improvements, given the 20% reduction in the journey times on the service and the corresponding reduction in the number of trains?

The central unfairness is the underlying and long-standing issue of fares for rail users from Reigate and Redhill. This historical anomaly, which is colloquially referred to as the Redhill hump, means that tickets purchased in Reigate and Redhill are more expensive than those available at stations further down the line. It costs 47% more to get an annual all-zone ticket from Redhill than it does from Coulsdon South, which is just two stops closer to London and in zone 6. Much of the work that I did during 2015 and 2016 was to try to convince the Minister’s predecessors that pulling zone 6 down to Gatwick would be the right way to address this issue. Bringing Gatwick into zone 6—in the same way that Heathrow is within London zoning—would produce an overall increase in income from fares, to make up for what would be a nominally reduced fare income based on current usage rates, because that zoning would bring an increase in usage, as was experienced when London Underground introduced zoning in the first place. I did not succeed in my argument, however, and part of that failure was down to the wretched complexity of the management of the railway, particularly when London issues are brought in alongside the issues of Network Rail, the service provider and the Department for Transport.

When it is £204 cheaper to buy an all-zone season ticket from Three Bridges, which is five stations further away from London than Redhill, we can understand why people are beginning to notice that they are paying too much to get an annual all-zone ticket from Redhill or Coulsdon South, which is just two stops from Croydon, compared to Gatwick. It is astonishing, given that the taxpayer has invested billions in the London Bridge upgrade and that the current Secretary of State was able to secure £300 million of extra investment in this line, that the service for my constituents is getting worse and there is no prospect of improvement that I can present to them. In short, rail users in my constituency are now at the end of their tether. They are forced to pay unreasonably high fare prices for a poor and diminishing service.

The main local capital improvement—a potential new 12-car platform at Reigate station that would enable Thameslink trains to terminate there and then return to London Bridge—has been in the drawing board only due to sustained pressure from me and to the commitment of the local director of National Rail. The reason that we even got that far was the prospect of a development gain bonanza from a wholly inappropriate development of larger houses at Redhill aerodrome. That development would have given the developer a massive gain of £1 billion, and I was planning to make a serious effort to retrieve a very good share of that utterly unmerited profit for use in major local infrastructure projects. I am grateful that, for the time being, that shocker of a green belt violation has been seen off, but the duty to address our hard and soft infrastructure deficit, following decades of strong local housing growth, remains.

One of the smaller and more urgent improvements involves enabling Reigate station to cope with its growing passenger demand. On one level, that growth represents a huge success. The number of passengers using Reigate station is growing, and we have been sustaining the growth of Reigate and the quality of life that explains why people want to live and bring up their families there. Not only does the change need making in its own right, we need to get this line working at a capacity that offers the service that it should be providing if one is to address the welcome improvements north of Croydon. I hope that the Minister will able to consider the proposal on both those grounds. I cannot find a large development to target to get investment into the local community, so I hope that he will consider the allocation of budgets within his Department’s spend, obviously on a wholly proper basis, to try to ensure that the capital infrastructure can at least be properly planned through the next stage, leaving the final decision to be made when the funds are available to construct it. If we are doing Croydon at the same time, it would make complete sense to advance that process.

Naturally, my constituents have expected me to remonstrate on their behalf and to press for service improvements to reverse the service catastrophes that the Redhill line has endured over the past four years. I have therefore had meetings with successive Secretaries of State and Rail Ministers to bring these serious matters to their direct attention and to request compensatory action of one sort or another. Through the Reigate, Redhill and District Rail Users Association, of which I have been honorary president since my election in 1997, local rail users have helped me put expert and costed proposals to Ministers and their officials.

With one small exception, I am sorry to say that all my efforts seem to have been largely in vain. My protests have been heard by successive Ministers, but none has been able to consider implementing any significant improvements, despite undertakings that they were going to try. At least one Rail Minister, my right hon. Friend the Member for Devizes (Claire Perry), resigned her position in 2015 due to frustration over the delivery of the GTR service and the London bridge investment programme.

The only significant result that I have achieved was a partial fare freeze for some ticketholders last year as a result of an intervention by the then Rail Minister, my lion. Friend the Member for Blackpool North and Cleveleys (Paul Maynard). Inevitably, the reality was not quite as widespread across all ticket types, but it was a start. In my meeting with the new Rail Minister in May, I was promised that the proposal to address the Redhill hump would be ready by the summer and that someone had been employed to work up a proposal.
Finally, the issue seemed to be getting serious attention. However, when I met my hon. Friend the Minister last week, he advised me that the proposal was still on the drawing board and would not be ready for preliminary discussion with experts from the RRDRUA until the second half of November. Indeed, unhappily, the Minister's only concrete news for me at that point was confirmation that compensation for the failure of the 2018 timetable introduction would definitely not be available for those using the service from Reigate.

I want to be clear that I am not asking for special treatment for local rail users. I am asking for a reasonable service, fare pricing, and equitable compensation. These four years of being told that my rail users are a priority, without any significant change, have made it very difficult for me to continue to defend to my constituents the Government's position. Redhill and Reigate are heavily used stations that provide transport to members of the public who contribute hugely to the British economy.

The cost of the disproportionate level of disruption that they have endured in recent years is incalculable, and surely greater than the cost of rectifying the anomalies that have made their commuting lives so miserable and have been so damaging to their productivity. I simply ask for reasonable treatment for them.

I am aware that many rail users throughout the UK have been hugely concerned about the Department for Transport’s role in the 2018 fiasco, but, coming after years of disruption relating to the London Bridge investment, the long-suffering Southern commuters are in a class of their own. I can fairly argue that they are a special case within the special case of Southern commuters. This has been a running sore for the people I represent within a wider overall shambles.

Where the responsibility lies is complex, arising from how the service was privatised back in the 1990s. I ask the Minister to help improve the experience of local rail users, who have been very unfairly treated. I made fair fares a central issue in my 2015 general election campaign, and I have since continued to campaign on that issue. If there is one issue, above all others, that can and should be addressed it is that, because of historical ticketing anomalies, the rail-traveling public I represent are not getting a fair economic deal from the service they are paying relative to everyone else.

I look forward to the Minister’s reply.

3.35 pm

The Minister of State, Department for Transport (Joseph Johnson): I congratulate my hon. Friend the Member for Reigate (Crispin Blunt) on securing this debate and on continuing his tireless campaign on behalf of his constituents in Reigate. He and I have discussed these issues on many occasions over the months I have been in this role. I understand his frustration at his relatively poor progress over the years on behalf of his residents, and I am pleased to say that I will have good news for him later in my remarks. His core concern is the Redhill hump, but, before I come to the meat of that, I will touch on some of the other issues he mentioned.

Thameslink performance through Redhill has improved, as I hope my hon. Friend will acknowledge, since the introduction of an amended timetable on 15 July. Services on the Brighton main line were some of the worst hit following the introduction of the timetable on 20 May, and I am glad that things are now improving. In fact, we have seen a public performance measure above 80% on Thameslink services through his constituency. Of course there is always room for improvement, and the Department is carefully monitoring the performance.

I am aware that services from Reigate have been affected by external issues, including trespass incidents in recent weeks. None the less, the long-term signs are moving in the right direction, which is why it is important that we see the progressive reintroduction of services that were withdrawn from the proposed May 2018 timetable.

In a couple of months’ time, in December, GTR will bring in a further 200 additional services every weekday across its network, including, as my hon. Friend will be pleased to hear, 18 services calling at Redhill and 14 calling at Merstham. I have made it clear to GTR that its improved performance has to be maintained as those services are introduced and that we must not see any slippage or return to the disruption associated with the past introduction of new services. I am confident that continued good performance, and those additional services from December, will allow passengers from Reigate to start feeling the benefits of the new timetable.

My hon. Friend also mentioned the constraints imposed by the current infrastructure, which we are in the process of addressing through the £300 million upgrade to the Brighton main line. One of those limitations is the short platforms at Reigate. The Reigate works will form an important part of the potential range of interventions in the Brighton main line upgrade programme, and they would allow the station to accommodate direct Thameslink services and provide greater operational flexibility for Thameslink. A study to investigate the feasibility and cost of this eventually necessary infrastructure has recently been completed by Network Rail.

Stoats Nest junction, to the south of Coulsdon, is also recognised as a constraint, and it is a potential part of the Brighton main line upgrade programme. We will look to future opportunities to progress the programme, subject to the development of positive business cases and the availability of funding.

My hon. Friend raised the question of compensation and special compensation. I certainly appreciate his points about the special compensation scheme following the May disruption for people travelling from Reigate, and I understand that passengers interchanging on to Thameslink services also suffered disruption—a point he made very forcefully to me in our meeting last week. However, to ensure that passengers were treated fairly and so that those who were most affected by the disruption received appropriate compensation, it was inevitably necessary to put in place clear criteria to define the scope of the scheme.

Passengers travelling from Reigate who would normally change on to Thameslink services were still able to travel on the less disrupted Southern services to Victoria and use the tube network to reach London Bridge. Ticket acceptance on the tube and between Thameslink, Southern and Gatwick Express services was in place at the height of disruption. As a result, as I said to my hon. Friend last week, there are no plans to amend the compensation scheme for passengers who change trains at a level 1 station or who buy tickets from a station not served by Thameslink or Great Northern services.
My hon. Friend has also been campaigning relentlessly for Reigate to be included in an extended Oyster zone. The Department set out in its strategic vision for rail, published in November last year, that its goal was to ensure that across regional and urban commuter areas smart ticketing can deliver the kind of pay-as-you-go structure that is used in London, with a system to automatically charge fares at the appropriate level.

We are actively exploring options for how that might be achieved, and I hope that my hon. Friend’s constituency will, in time, and hopefully not within too much time, be one of those that benefits from the broader approach we will be taking.

We want to deliver pay-as-you-go travel across regional and urban commuter areas rather than singling out particular stations, such as his own, at this point. Pay-as-you-go travel and the associated simplified fare structure will bring substantial passenger benefits and the Department will be working very hard to achieve that.

Finally, let me return to what my hon. Friend rightly described as his core issue, the Redhill fares hump. Historically, this has arisen because separate operators on the Brighton main line have put in place specific fares that were intended to make their service more competitive. Now, all services on the Brighton main line are run by the same operator. This has led to a situation where the fares in his constituency are unnecessarily complex and unhelpfully perverse, with fares from Gatwick airport into London at a lower price than those in all surrounding stations. This is a truly exceptional situation. I made a commitment to him that we would work on this issue and provide a solution, and I am pleased to say that we have done exactly that.

Today, I can make a commitment that we will see this issue resolved by the end of the current franchise in 2021, with a reduction in fares coming into effect from this coming January. I hope that my hon. Friend will welcome that news, which results directly from his tireless and effective campaign on behalf of all his constituents.

Crispin Blunt: I have managed to scrape in before the Minister’s last word. Obviously, his concluding remarks are immensely welcome, and it would be ungracious of me not to be delighted on behalf of my constituents that he has had the opportunity to reflect and put a plan in place to get this issue addressed. I am immensely grateful. I am afraid that we will continue to have meetings on the merits of the other issues, but I am delighted that we will get Oyster as it is rolled out across the piece. He will probably continue to be lobbied by my hon. Friend the Member for Croydon South (Chris Philp), I am afraid, as his constituents who travel to the further education colleges in my constituency are caught by this problem, but, overall, I am very grateful to the Minister.

Joseph Johnson: I am delighted that we have a happy customer in Reigate and Redhill. I am always ready to receive further lobbying from my hon. Friend on the points that he raised.

Question put and agreed to.

3.44 pm

House adjourned.
Westminster Hall  
Tuesday 9 October 2018

Oil and Gas Industry

11.30 am

John Mc Nally (Falkirk) (SNP): I beg to move, That this House has considered the future of the oil and gas industry.

It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Mr Hollobone.

I start my contribution today by taking a moment to remember the 167 workers who lost their lives 30 years ago in the Piper Alpha disaster, off the coast of Aberdeen, on 6 July 1988. Piper Alpha is the world’s deadliest ever oil rig accident. This anniversary is and should be a reminder to us all that we must remain vigilant and do all we can to help the oil and gas sector in seeking to eliminate major hazards and risks.

I will focus my remarks on the success of the North sea oil and gas industry, and on how the sector is working alongside its partners downstream and in its supply chain to secure a lower-carbon future. I will also outline two choices that the UK Government must make. The first is to protect existing labour and supply chains through the single market and customs union membership, or risk sacrificing world-leading firms and skilled, productive jobs.

Martyn Day (Linlithgow and East Falkirk) (SNP): I am grateful to my hon. Friend for securing this important debate and for taking an intervention so early. Grangemouth, which is in my constituency, is home to Scotland’s only crude oil refinery, as well as the terminus of the North sea Forties pipeline system. It hosts a number of petrochemical plants and leading players in the chemical sector’s gross value added in Scotland. In total, 60% of the UK’s chemical exports and 75% of imports are to and from the EU. How important is it to have frictionless, tariff-free trade, and to ensure that multinational companies can move their staff between different countries to support local jobs and growth across districts?

John Mc Nally: My hon. Friend makes an excellent point; it is absolutely essential that we remain in the customs union. Of course, I will come on to the importance of frictionless trade and the supply of labour later in my speech; indeed, I hope that everybody will speak about that.

The second choice that the UK Government must make is to recognise the £350 billion contribution to the Treasury that the sector has made over the past 50 years and provide the political certainty and financial support it needs now, or risk undermining North sea oil and gas by once again using it as a cash cow, this time to pay for Brexit Britain.

With sales up by 18.2% between 2016-17 and 2017-18 and the North sea holding up to 20 billion barrels of oil, the sector is in very strong health. Recent industry announcements, such as BP’s successful discoveries in the Capercaillie and Achmelvich wells, Nexen’s phase II development of the Buzzard field, and the Norwegian oil and gas giant Equinor’s deal to buy Rosebank’s share of the oil reserves to the west of Shetland, demonstrate the enormous investment potential that the United Kingdom continental shelf still holds.

The sector supports 283,000 jobs across the UK. In the town of Grangemouth, which is in my neighbouring constituency of Linlithgow and East Falkirk, INEOS alone employs 1,300 people, including seven new apprentices, who started training in 2017. Those figures somewhat contradict the predictions we hear about the sector’s constant decline. Healthy investment is continuing.

Martyn Day: I am grateful to my hon. Friend for giving way again and for mentioning the great work that goes on in my constituency. INEOS, which now owns the Forties pipeline system, estimates that the economic life of the asset will be extended to 2040, which is 10 years longer than BP’s original projection. INEOS has already invested £500 million in the Grangemouth site in the last five years, and it is now investing in infrastructure projects at Grangemouth that will have a further positive impact on the longevity and reliability of the Forties pipeline. The firm has already committed to the UK’s North sea sector with investment in the northern gasfields west of Shetland, which contain the Lyon prospect. However, I wonder how much potential investment by the wider sector has been delayed until the uncertainty of Brexit has passed. Will he join me in calling on the UK Government to do more to stimulate exploration and investment?

John Mc Nally: I thank my hon. Friend for that intervention; again, he makes a very good point indeed. He is right to raise the concerns about investment, and I join him in calling for the UK Government to support and encourage investment in this vital asset that we have on our shores. I give him my full support in that regard.

Healthy investment is continuing, even though in some cases the level may not be as good as it should be, and new discoveries are being made and developed. In 2017-18, revenues from Scottish North sea oil and gas increased to £1.3 billion. Surely it is now time that the UK Government acted to support the sector’s future.

The sector recognises the need to decarbonise our economy and its responsibilities in supporting that transition. It is an international leader in supporting the low-carbon transition. Average emissions per unit of production on the United Kingdom continental shelf—its carbon intensity—have fallen year on year since 2013, with total emissions in decline from their peak in 2000. Firms are increasingly diversifying and using their existing skills to grasp opportunities emerging from the green economy, thereby providing sustainable employment. Often, infrastructure owners and operators in the oil and gas sector are already part of wider portfolios across a range of conventional and renewable energy sources. Contractors and supply chain companies with expertise in offshore operations and maintenance are also providing solutions across a range of energy industries, to diversify and replenish their order books.
As we all know, innovation is absolutely key to that process. Building the sector of tomorrow presents exciting and challenging opportunities for our people. The Offshore Petroleum Industry Training Organisation’s workforce dynamics report has predicted that by 2025 there could be as many as 10,000 roles that require completely new skills. It is reassuring to note that the industry continues to attract young people to build its future. There were 105 new entrants to the oil and gas technical apprentice programme in September alone. Once again, I have seen that forward-looking agenda at first hand in my neighbouring constituency of Linlithgow and East Falkirk.

As I mentioned, the town of Grangemouth is home to Scotland’s only crude oil refinery. It is a truly remarkable site. For example, the refinery was the first to introduce ultra low sulphur diesel and ultra low sulphur petrol to the UK market. Grangemouth already makes up approximately 8% of Scotland’s manufacturing base. Many of my constituents are employed at the site or in its supply chain. Grangemouth’s success shows the impact that downstream operations and manufacturing can have on the economy, locally and globally.

Martyn Day: I am grateful to my hon. Friend for his indulgence in giving way to me so many times. Grangemouth has one of the country’s largest concentrations of energy-intensive industries in downstream petrochemicals operations, and its development of a strategically located carbon capture and storage infrastructure in its industrial cluster may be essential to ensuring that those industries can compete in the low-carbon world that is coming in the future. I know that the Grangemouth site, INEOS and others are working with Imperial College as part of a wider collaboration to evaluate the feasibility of CCS for the UK. Does my hon. Friend agree that this developing technology would have been given a huge boost if the UK Government had not cancelled its CCS competition back in 2015, and that that decision demonstrated how they are failing the long-term interests of the industry?

John Mc Nally: Once again, my hon. Friend makes a good point about the need for long-term certainty of investment and policy. The CCS decision was an example of a shambolic state of affairs, given that many hundreds of millions of pounds had been invested for the future. That future was basically taken away from under investors’ feet, so I absolutely agree with him.

The export-orientated supply chain generates about £30 billion annually across the UK, and its exported services deliver £12 billion, and the future blueprint for the sector, “Vision 2035”, grasps the importance of that. Alongside adding a generation of productive life to the basin, the blueprint has the objective of doubling the long-term opportunities for the supply chain. If we work together to maximise production from the UK continental shelf and to help the supply chain grow its share of the global energy market, we can boost that prize by half again and generate £290 billion of revenue for the UK economy through to 2035. That is a real game changer for us all. By doubling its share of the global market and embracing the opportunities available through diversification into other markets, the sector can achieve an additional £150 billion of revenue above the baseline estimate of £350 billion.

However, Grangemouth, its workforce and the wider sector are being put at risk by Brexit. The latest Oil & Gas UK report makes it clear that Brexit will have a significant impact on the oil and gas sector, warning about the impact on frictionless access to goods and services, and that the UK Government’s Brexit plans could cause a “skills shortage” for vital North sea services such as emergency response and rescue vehicles.

The Scottish National party is clear that the best way to achieve the goals I have mentioned is to protect Scotland’s place in the single market and the customs union. The Scottish Government have delivered an exceptional range of support for the oil and gas sector and its workforce, including an investment of £2.4 billion in enterprise and skills through our enterprise agencies and skills bodies, £90 million over the next decade to support the Oil & Gas Technology Centre as part of the Aberdeen city region deal, and a £12 million transition training fund to support individuals and help the sector to retain talent.

The other major risk that is looming also comes from Westminster, and that is the Budget on 29 October. With the Treasury having taken about £350 billion from the oil and gas sector in the past 50 years, this is an opportunity for the UK Government to repay their debts and show their support for the sector. The Chancellor must ensure in his autumn Budget that the UKCS is globally attractive for investment, with a competitive and predictable fiscal regime. The UK Government must not repeat the mistakes of previous Administrations and undermine the sector by using it as the Treasury’s cash cow. Instead, they must protect tax incentives designed to support the sector, introduce measures to improve exploration and attract fresh investment, complete the work on transferable tax history, urgently ensure that the tax treatment of late-life assets is addressed so that those assets are in the right hands, and support the urgently required alternative solution to end-use relief.

The SNP also demands that the UK Government use the autumn Budget to implement an oil and gas sector deal, instead of dragging their feet, as is currently the case in Ayrshire, Tayside and Inverness. A sector deal should support practical steps to protect, progress and promote operators, the supply chain and the offshore and onshore workforce. A sector deal for the oil and gas sector must include visionary national hubs for underwater innovation, transformational technology and decommissioning, based in Aberdeen but serving the whole industry.

In conclusion, North sea oil and gas is booming and the sector is working hard alongside its downstream and supply chain partners to secure a bright, lower-carbon future. The sector has a clear route map in “Vision 2035” and is ably supported by the Scottish Government, who are using their limited powers to the full. The UK Government must now make two choices: to protect the supply chains and the labour supply through single market and customs union membership, and to provide the long-term political certainty and financial support that the sector needs.

Several hon. Members rose—

Mr Philip Hollobone (in the Chair): Order. The debate can last until 1 pm. I am obliged to call the Front-Bench spokespeople no later than 12.27 pm, and there will be 10 minutes for the SNP Front Bench for the 10 minutes after Her Majesty’s Opposition and 10 minutes for the Minister. I would be obliged, Minister, if you allowed the mover
of the motion three minutes to sum up at the end. Eight Members are seeking to catch my eye, so I will impose a time limit of five minutes and the clock will act as a helpful guide to those making speeches.

11.45 am

Peter Aldous (Waveney) (Con): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Mr Hollobone. I congratulate the hon. Member for Falkirk (John McNally) on securing the debate, and he has done so at an opportune time, just under three weeks before the Chancellor delivers his Budget. He has also provided us with the opportunity to highlight the vital importance of the industry to the UK: it is essential for the UK’s security of energy supply, it has contributed billions of pounds to the Exchequer over the past 50 years, and it provides hundreds of thousands of highly skilled and well-paid jobs.

The industry has been through a great deal in recent years. As a result of the collapse in the price of Brent crude, tens of thousands of jobs have been lost and the industry has had to restructure. In many respects, it has emerged fitter and leaner, but significant challenges remain. It is vital that the tripartite approach of industry, regulator—the Oil & Gas Authority—and Government working together continues. The oil price has bounced back, but that is almost certainly for short-term global geopolitical reasons, and it would be complacent to assume that the higher price will be sustained into the longer term. Production is up significantly, and by the end of the year could be 20% higher than over the past five years. Significant cost reductions have been made, though it is important that they are sustained if the industry is to remain globally competitive. However, warning lights remain on amber, with exploratory drilling activity at a record low and the revenues of supply chain businesses continuing to fall. It is vital that exploration and production companies work collaboratively with their supply chains, as their respective futures are very much intertwined.

I will briefly highlight three factors that need to be centre stage for the industry to continue to play its lead role. The first is the need for a stable fiscal regime. One of the key reasons why the UK continental shelf has an attractive investment proposition is that it is fiscally competitive. That reputation has been hard won and must not be thrown away because of an increase in tax rates. That would be short-termism, and it would cause lasting damage. In the Budget, the Chancellor should re-emphasise the Government’s commitment to the “Driving investment” plan. The proposals for transferable tax history, to be included in the forthcoming Finance Bill, are extremely welcome and will drive investment in late-life assets and maximise economic recovery. It is also vital that the Treasury urgently clarifies its plans for ship end-use relief and introduces proposals that are in line with the “Driving investment” plan.

Secondly, it is vital never to forget those who work in the industry. As the hon. Member for Falkirk said, 167 people lost their lives in the Piper Alpha disaster 30 years ago. The drive for business efficiency, which is very important for the industry’s future, must never compromise safety. It is also important to provide attractive career paths to encourage people into the industry. OPITO estimates that there is a need to recruit 40,000 people into the industry over the next 20 years, 10,000 of them into roles that currently do not exist. The “Workforce Dynamics” review has been taking place this year, and skills demand maps are being worked up. The Government should encourage and support that initiative, which will enable the industry to employ safe and well-trained people who will maximise its contribution to the UK economy.

Lastly, the industry must provide a bridge to a low-carbon future, which means setting out a clear and deliverable deployment pathway for carbon capture, utilisation and storage. The Government should consider carefully the conclusions of the cost challenge taskforce and work with the industry to develop regional clusters that will bring significant economic benefits to both the north-east and Scotland.

Off the East Anglian coast, in my part of the world, an enormous development of offshore wind farms is taking place. The two industries—oil and gas and offshore wind—need to work together. There are encouraging signs that that is beginning to take place, as evidenced by the Oil & Gas Authority’s promotion of “Gas to Wire”, which involves the gas produced from gasfields being generated into electricity offshore, and then transmitted to shore via spare capacity in the subsea cables used for wind farms. The industry has a great future—it is important we do not squander it.

11.50 am

Jamie Stone (Caithness, Sutherland and Easter Ross) (LD): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Mr Hollobone. As time is pressing, I will try to keep my contribution relatively brief. I want to make two points. First, I want to remind Members of the historical context as it applies to oil and gas and the north of Scotland.

When I was at Tain Royal Academy in the north of Scotland, many of the brightest and best in my class left to go south—perhaps a rather sad facet of life in the highlands. Despite the best efforts, people left and sought employment further south; indeed, my own father said to me, “Go south, young man. That’s where your future lies.” However, in the 1970s, as we all know, the music changed completely and utterly, and the oil came.

I would not have married and brought up children locally if I had not been employed in the Nigg yard. The point is that the depopulation trend was halted and actually reversed, so we cannot underestimate the social importance of Nigg’s contribution to the highland economy. I would not have married and brought up children locally if I had not been employed in the Nigg yard. The fact that my children were born locally and went to the local school is entirely down to the fact that that was where I was employed and had the income to live and to grow my family. In succeeding generations, we saw increasing evidence of a reversal of the population decline, as top-quality jobs supported local infrastructure and the local economy, so we should not forget how important that contribution was for the highland economy and how, structurally, it was very much to the good.

My second point brings us to today. Very good contributions have already been made, and the potential of offshore wind was mentioned. In my constituency, we have the Beatrice wind farm nearing completion—an
example of technology that is cutting edge for the future, but that is in many ways based on technology that went before, in terms of fabrication and working in very inclement conditions in the North sea. As I see that technology approach completion, I take considerable pride in the fact that, not long from now, it will be making a major national contribution to our grid and will literally keep the lights on.

West of Shetland, as I am sure Members will also mention, we still have great potential for the future. Discoveries continue to be made. It is deep water with incredibly inclement conditions, but the technology has moved forward. There is much more subsea work, but there is the new oil.

My point is this: I wish I knew what was going to happen with Brexit. I do not know, and I am sure many Members will tease me and say, “Would a Lib Dem know anyway?” However, I am damn sure that the contribution that the oil industry has made in the past, makes today and can make in the future to my constituency, to the constituency of my right hon. Friend the Member for Orkney and Shetland (Mr Carmichael) and to the remotest parts of Scotland is absolutely huge. So my final point is a plea to the Minister, Her Majesty’s Government and future Governments. I want them to remember the goose that laid the golden egg: the oil and gas industry. Please preserve it, enhance it and protect it for the generations to come.

11.54 am

David Duguid (Banff and Buchan) (Con): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Mr Hollobone. I congratulate the hon. Member for Falkirk (John McNally) on securing this important debate. As many colleagues know, before I was elected to this place, I spent 25 years working in the oil and gas industry, as many of my constituents still do. The industry is still a major employer in my constituency, as is the supply chain that supports it.

Almost half the UK’s oil and gas makes landfall by pipeline in my constituency. The Forties pipeline system, which has been mentioned, comes ashore just outside the coastal village of Cruden Bay and carries about 30% of the UK’s oil. St Fergus, a few miles up the coast, is the location of the St Fergus gas terminal, through which 25% of the UK’s gas is imported through three different pipelines. St Fergus is also the site of a new project currently being developed for carbon capture and storage—a technology that has already been mentioned.

A little further south is the slightly lesser known city of Aberdeen, which many know as the oil capital of Europe, and rightly so. Many people from my constituency and from all around the north-east of Scotland commute to Aberdeen, heading not only to the worksites and offices in and around Aberdeen, in the constituencies of my hon. Friends the Members for West Aberdeenshire and Kincardine (Andrew Bowie) and for Gordon (Colin Clark), who I am sure we will hear from, but offshore, to and from the world’s busiest commercial heliport at Dyce.

At the start of the downturn in 2014, more than 460,000 jobs in the UK depended on the oil and gas sector. Throughout 2015 and 2016, the number fell steadily, reaching 280,000 in 2017, with about 40% in Scotland and 60% in the rest of the UK. As we approach the end of 2018, the sector is seeing a cautious increase in employment for the first time since the start of the downturn. I say “cautious” because we have been in this situation before, going through the cycle of a high oil price followed by a crash in revenue and knee-jerk cost-cutting measures, followed by an equally impulsive return to wasteful spending when oil prices recover. I am encouraged by conversations I have had with oil companies in Aberdeen and with Oil & Gas UK and the Oil & Gas Authority, based in Aberdeen, because it feels as though lessons have been learned from the past. However, time will tell. Will the Minister take that into account in his response?

Even before the downturn in 2014, it was long realised that many of the wasteful and inefficient practices were not sustainable. The report by Sir Ian Wood in 2014 made a range of recommendations, including a joint Government and industry strategy for maximising economic recovery, or MER, and the creation of a new arm’s length body charged with the effective stewardship and regulation of UK continental shelf hydrocarbon recovery and with maximising collaboration across the industry. The new arm’s length body, the Oil & Gas Authority, working with industry, developed the MER UK strategy. Under the strategy, a range of taskforces have already delivered huge value: an additional 2.8 billion barrels of oil equivalent to be produced by 2050, in comparison with pre-Wood report baseline forecasts; average unit lifting costs reduced from £19 per barrel to £12 per barrel in 2017; and production efficiency increased from 65% in 2014 to 73% two years later. There is still a lot of upside there to be had.

Through Oil & Gas UK’s “Vision 2035”, it is estimated that the industry could generate £920 billion of revenue to the UK economy. By 2035, two thirds of the UK’s primary energy is predicted to still be produced from oil and gas, with 60% coming from our own UK resources. Renewable sources of energy will and must continue to grow over that time, but they will not be able to meet the full demand.

MER is a strategy that can co-exist with a low-carbon agenda. As efficiencies improve, fossil fuels are burned more cleanly, CO2 can be captured, stored and used to help enhance oil recovery, and the full transition away from oil and gas may actually be extended while still meeting climate change targets.

In summary, the future of the oil and gas industry is positive, but there needs to be flexibility and openness to change. We have seen support for this from the Government, which is very welcome. Transferable tax history was a great good news story from last year’s Budget and shows how important it is that Members of Parliament, especially those representing constituencies in the north-east of Scotland, speak up for the oil and gas industry. According to Oil & Gas UK, TTH is one of a range of policies that can help the industry realise up to £30 billion of future investment opportunities.

I will conclude by asking the Minister to provide, if possible, an update on the decision on the sector deal that has been mentioned. That would be most welcome.

11.59 am

Jim Shannon (Strangford) (DUP): I thank and congratulate the hon. Member for Falkirk (John McNally) for securing this debate. As often happens during debates in Westminster Hall, although the issue might not directly

[Jamie Stone]
It is clear, however, that we must do more to address prices for consumers. The Minister may not be directly responsible, but my biggest plea to him is that, because energy prices fluctuate, people consuming oil and gas think they are saving money when they come to pay for it, but actually they are not. Back home in Northern Ireland, a number of constituents who changed between oil and gas six months ago have found themselves in a difficult place in the past few weeks. That is yet another squeeze on so many families who cannot afford it, and we must address that issue at the highest level.

I look to the Minister for advice on how we can and will secure the future of this industry, and on our ability to provide our own sustainable energy source for heating in this great nation of the United Kingdom of Great Britain and Northern Ireland.

12.4 pm

**Bill Grant** (Ayr, Carrick and Cumnock) (Con): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Mr Hollobone, and I thank the hon. Member for Falkirk (John McNally) for securing this important debate.

I welcome the stated aim of the Oil & Gas UK trade association, which is “to strengthen the long-term health of the offshore oil and gas industry in the United Kingdom by working closely with companies across the sector, governments and all other stakeholders”.

In late 2014, Her Majesty’s Treasury developed a plan to reform the oil and gas fiscal regime. Over the last 50 years, the oil and gas industry has contributed more than £350 billion to the UK Exchequer in production tax revenue alone—not an insignificant sum.

In 2017 the UK Government’s industrial strategy stated:

“We can also reduce costs for the UK as a whole by making intelligent use of our oil and gas assets and expertise. While the move towards clean growth is clear, oil and gas remains one of the most productive sectors of the UK economy, supporting 200,000 jobs directly and in the supply chain, and generating £24 billion in annual exports. The emerging shale gas industry offers the prospect of creating jobs, enhancing the competitiveness of downstream sectors and building up supply chains.”

It seems likely that shale gas will be extracted only south of the border, as the Scottish Government appear—I emphasise the word “appear”—to have placed a moratorium on that source of energy. I understand, however, that imported shale gas from the US is helpful when securing the future of the important Grangemouth plant.

I read with interest a recent post note in the journal of the all-party group for energy studies, which considered decarbonising or reducing the carbon content of UK gas supplies as an option for reducing emissions from heating, potentially substituting natural gas with hydrogen or biomethane. I am pleased that such welcome research is continuing in that field. Indeed, some businesses in my constituency are already utilising biomethane, although not necessarily to the exclusion of natural gas.

The opening in February 2017 of Aberdeen’s Oil & Gas Technology Centre clearly illustrates both the UK and Scottish Governments’ commitment to the future of the oil and gas sector. The £180 million investment aims to unlock the full potential of the UK North sea for future generations, which is essential for meeting future demand, not just in the UK but globally, is predicted to increase as global living standards and population levels rise.
Another important aspect for the future is securing for the UK work associated with the decommissioning of platforms and subsea facilities where a cost-benefit analysis proves that to be prudent. The Oil & Gas Authority has stated that such work may create a globally competitive market for the UK. The aim of the Department for Business, Energy and Industrial Strategy is to maximise the economic recovery in relation to the UK’s continental shelf, and it endeavours to secure maximum value for economically recoverable hydrocarbons.

Although the oil market is volatile—post 2014 the price of a barrel of Brent crude plummeted—it is clear that oil and gas have a positive future. That future may not be a mirror image of the past, but rather a new vision, as scientific research and innovation define and constantly refine it for our children and grandchildren. Oil and gas may not have the same exclusivity they once experienced, but in my view they will remain part of an inclusive package of energy options for some time to come.

Let me turn to a fuel from the past—coal. These days, open-cast or imported coal is used mostly as an integral part of the UK manufacturing sector, especially in the chemical process to make steel and cement. Many Members present, however, will recall when coal was king. Collieries in Ayr, Carrick and Cumnock, such as Littlemill, Killoch, Barony, Knockshinnoch and Beoch, to name but a few, fuelled the industrial revolution and kept the home fires burning. Sadly, there are no longer any deep mines in the United Kingdom, and coal is outlawed as a polluting fuel. With the recent alarming UN report on global warming, we must be aware that the same fate may befall oil and gas in the rush to embrace clean renewables and to prevent a catastrophic rise in global temperatures. In closing, therefore, I ask the Minister to comment briefly on that recent UN report on rising global temperatures.

12.9 pm

Alan Brown (Kilmarnock and Loudoun) (SNP): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Mr Hollobone. I congratulate my hon. Friend the Member for Falkirk (John Mc Nally) on introducing what is clearly a timely debate, given that the Budget is forthcoming. As he rightly said, that Tory Budget cannot undermine the future of the oil and gas industry. That money has simply been frittered away.

Colin Clark (Gordon) (Con): Will the hon. Gentleman give way?

Alan Brown: No, because I have limited time.

Where is the legacy from the UK Government? Where is the onshore infrastructure investment to support Aberdeen? It has been left to the Scottish National party Government to pick up the pieces, including the Aberdeen bypass and rail improvements. Where is the oil fund we have called for? Norway’s oil fund, started in 1990, has now topped $1 trillion in assets, and last year returned a profit of $131 billion. That alone gives lie to the myth that Scotland relies on the broad shoulders of the UK to deal with any price volatility. Careful stewardship would have taken care of that.

Let us look at the measures the UK Government have taken recently. In the spring 2016 Budget, they reduced the supplementary charge back to 10%. That was very welcome, but the predicted cost to the Treasury of £1 billion was only a third of the inheritance tax giveaway to millionaires—such were their priorities. In the November 2017 Budget, the transferable tax history was a welcome measure, but given that it was predicted to bring an additional £70 million in revenue to the Treasury, that was not a difficult decision. The UK Government need to close out the process going forward. Over the same period, we have had the £1 billion carbon capture and storage betrayal. That project would have facilitated diversification from the wider oil and gas industry.

As others have recognised, the offshore oil industry has clearly been a great success story and has turned Aberdeen into a global city. Despite the predictions of when oil will run out, there is still a bright future. Just last month, Total announced a major gas discovery off Shetland, with an estimated 1 trillion cubic feet of gas that can be extracted. Rosebank, off the west of Shetland, is estimated to contain around 300 million barrels of oil. Equinor has called it “one of the biggest undeveloped finds on the UK Continental Shelf.”

Overall, the North sea holds significant potential, with the equivalent of up to 20 billion barrels of oil remaining. That could sustain production for the next 20 years. I repeat that the UK Government cannot do another cash grab on the industry. Production statistics show that the sales value of oil and gas has gone up, and we know that production of oil and gas remains 23% higher than the level recorded in 2014-15. Even so, the UK Government must introduce measures to improve the exploration and attract fresh investment. They need to support the industry in its ambitions to increase the total economic value of the North sea.

With the publication of the Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change report, we have to recognise the wider climate change issues and that the world is not on track to meet the temperature goals of the Paris agreement. The UK Government will have to take action in that regard, but that does not mean that we need to pull out of the North sea any time soon. Even if we did, we would then be reliant on imports.

Scotland’s energy strategy recognises that a strong domestic oil and gas industry can play a positive role in supporting the low carbon transition. What would help that transition, while we are still extracting oil and gas, is carbon capture and storage, greater investment in renewables, and allowing onshore wind developments in Scotland. The UK Government must also back away from the nuclear folly, and invest that money in offshore renewables, grid upgrades and directly in energy efficiency measures in homes.

We must recognise that the North sea industry is highly regulated, with some of the most advanced and comparatively least polluting production methods in the world. The industry is focused on reducing its
carbon footprint and average emissions have fallen year on year since 2013. An oil and gas sector deal could help that process. Where is it? We really need one, and we need to hear about that from the Minister. The future of the oil and gas industry is bright, but it needs better leadership from the UK Government.

12.14 pm

Andrew Bowie (West Aberdeenshire and Kincardine) (Con): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Mr Hollobone. I congratulate the hon. Member for Falkirk (John Mc Nally) on securing this important and timely debate.

Hailing from the north-east of Scotland, having grown up surrounded by the oil and gas industry, having worked for an incredibly brief time in the sector, and now representing a constituency to which its continued success is vital, I know all too well the importance of the industry to not just the north-east of Scotland but the wider UK economy. Looking around the Chamber, contributing to debates about the industry’s future seems to be the preserve of Members who represent such constituencies as mine, which is unfortunate. Yes, the industry is based proudly in the north-east of Scotland, but it is a UK-wide industry that has contributed more than £330 billion to the British economy, supports more than 350,000 jobs across the UK and has a supply chain worth nearly £30 billion stretching into every nation, region and community across our islands— as demonstrated by the hon. Member for Strangford (Jim Shannon)—both servicing domestic activities and exporting almost £12 billion of goods and services to other basins across the world.

The success of the North sea oil and gas industry is, of course, a story born in the north-east of Scotland—all good things are—but it is a whole-UK success. It depressed me beyond belief to hear, not that long ago, a colleague exclaim, when he heard about the recent discovery west of Shetland on the Glendronach field of around 1 trillion cubic feet of extractable gas—the largest discovery of conventional gas in the UK since 2008, with a productive life of 10 to 15 years—that that was remarkable. He did not know that any exploration was going on anymore. He thought it was all decommissioning and closing up shop for the North sea oil and gas industry.

Sadly, that is a common misconception. Of course decommissioning is taking place in the North sea at the moment, and the rate of decom activity will increase in the years ahead, but that is only one small part of the story. Anyone who takes a stroll around the Oil & Gas Technology Centre in Aberdeen or visits the Oil & Gas Innovation Centre in Bridge of Don, in the constituency of my hon. Friend the Member for Gordon (Colin Clark), will be blown away by the great advances in technology being made. There is exciting, explorative work being done on the smaller fields in the North sea, led by enterprising smaller companies growing in the sector, such as ROVOP in my constituency. There is also the sustained commitment to the area of big companies, such as BP, which recently announced its two North sea developments, which are expected to produce 30,000 barrels gross of oil equivalent per day at peak production.

This is not an industry in decline; this is an industry with a positive future, but it remains in recovery. We are still emerging from the deepest and most sustained downturn in the sector’s history. Many jobs were lost, some companies disappeared completely and others had to radically change how they did business. However, through shared learning and experiences, through economising and doing much more with much less, and with the support of the Scottish Government and the UK Government, which has supported the sector to the tune of £2.3 billion, the industry is confident about the future.

However, as many Members have said, what the industry needs more than anything else is fiscal stability. The North sea is one of the most attractive mature basins in the world in which to invest today, because of the long-term and fiscally sensible approach taken by Her Majesty’s Treasury since 2014. It was evident a couple of months ago, however, when there was just a hint of a change in policy or an increase in tax, that that would upset the recovery and put off investment, which could have damaging consequences.

Let the call go out from the Chamber today, from every Member and from every party represented, that we wholeheartedly support our oil and gas industry, that we recognise the huge value that it brings to the entire United Kingdom and that now is not the time to consider changing the fiscal situation, increasing tax or putting off further investment. Let us work with the sector and both of Scotland’s Governments to ensure a positive, long-term and productive future for this world-leading industry.

12.18 pm

Colin Clark (Gordon) (Con): It is a pleasure to see you in the Chair, Mr Hollobone. I congratulate the hon. Member for Falkirk (John Mc Nally) on securing the debate, only a few months after my own debate on the industry.

Oil and gas is a massive part of the UK economy and an enormous part of my constituency of Gordon, with 233 service companies operating from Gordon alone. I routinely claim that I have the largest oil and gas footprint, but other Members may try to argue the point. Thanks to this Government, and the transferable tax history that will come into effect in November, billions of pounds of investment will be released into the industry. I am disappointed that voices from the Opposition Benches have said that transferable tax history is the wrong thing to do.

The industry continues to develop efficiencies in decommissioning, supported by Her Majesty’s Treasury. It contributes £1 billion a year to HM Treasury—somewhere short of the estimated £11 billion that the Scottish National party, during the independence referendum, claimed would be contributed. Fifty-nine UK constituencies have a major oil and gas footprint and, as my hon. Friend the Member for West Aberdeenshire and Kincardine (Andrew Bowie) said, the same Members seem to turn up for such debates. Many other areas should realise what a significant industry oil and gas is. It is truly national and international, and it is not a dying industry. It has shrunk from 4.5 million barrels a day to 1.5 million. It is still of great importance, and it has tremendous longevity.

Why is that industry so important to the north-east? The north-east has 8% of the population of Scotland, but 18% of its economy. Even during the downturn,
unemployment only got to 1.2%, because the people of the north-east believe in getting out and working, even if it is in another part of the world. The north-east is the engine room of the Scottish economy. The cost of living is higher and house prices were driven up by the boom years, but we have the highest council tax bills. It is the most expensive place to live in Scotland, because the Scottish Government chose to put council tax bills up. Employers feel penalised by higher business rates, to the extent that buildings are being knocked down in the north-east of Scotland. I recently drove past the Baker Hughes GE building in the constituency neighbouring mine, and I am told it will have to be knocked down because the business rates are so punitive.

The UK Government have delivered, with transferable tax history, a massive incentive for oil and gas estimated at £30 billion. The fiscal policy that is making the UK continental shelf the place to produce oil and gas is that of the UK Government, and there is low corporation tax for the whole sector, UK-wide, because of the UK Government. In the north-east there is the highest concentration of engineers and technicians in the UK. We have an incredibly strong and robust economy. The industry puts safety first, absolutely, and I pay tribute to Step Change in Safety, which has brought together producers, the service sector and offshore workers in a collaborative effort.

As for any downturn in activity, the Oil and Gas Authority estimates that £400 billion is still to come from the North sea through collaborative action. Chrysaor, a private equity-backed organisation, invested £3.8 billion from the North sea through collaborative action. Chrysaor,

The hon. Member for West Aberdeenshire and Kincardine (Andrew Bowie) set out particularly clearly cause a real problem for my city and for the oil and gas industry. One of the points most often raised was the requirement for a stable taxation regime for the oil and gas industry. One of the points most often raised with me is that if there is a story in the Financial Times about the possibility of the Treasury increasing, or massively changing, tax in relation to oil and gas, that story alone causes a problem for the industry. It is a huge concern that that might be less easy after Brexit, particularly if the immigration plans mentioned at the Conservative party conference go through and we end up in a situation where very few immigrants are allowed to come to the UK. That would cause a real problem for my city and for the oil and gas industry as a whole.

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Kirsty Blackman: We were both at the same meeting when the Exchequer Secretary to the Treasury came up. I think it was the myth being peddled that did the damage—he clarified it from the Treasury. Does the hon. Lady agree?

Kirsty Blackman: I do not disagree at all. I understood that that was a private meeting, so I did not want to talk about what that Minister said during it, but it would be good if the Chancellor could make a clear statement in the Budget. I agree that it was the myth, rather than any statement by the Treasury, that caused the problem. I am sorry; I thought I had been clear on that point.

There are other asks for the Budget. I have not heard anyone on the Opposition Benches being negative about transferable tax history. I apologise to the hon. Member for Gordon (Colin Clark), but I was calling for that in March 2016, which was more than a year before he was elected. We have consistently called for changes in the taxation regime for late-life assets. I have made the case for that on many occasions, and I am pleased that it may be coming through. I hope that is a good example of the industry working together. Things have happened a bit more slowly than I would have liked, but the industry worked well with Government, and the
conversation went well about trying to make the tax regime work from the point of view of both the Government and the industry.

The importance of transferable tax history is because of what happens when assets at the end of their life are transferred to another company. Something that belongs to a big company with many different onshore installations will probably not be its No. 1 priority, but if it belongs to a new entrant and is all that it is concentrating on, it will be a priority. That is why transferable tax history is so important for maximising economic recovery.

The point about end-use relief is a good one. My hon. Friend the Member for Falkirk and the hon. Member for Waveney (Peter Aldous) both mentioned it. Whatever happens, it is vital that the Government should speak to the industry about the best way to make the change work, if there is to be a change, and that as much notice as possible should be given of changes to end-use relief. We nearly had a big disaster in July, with the pulling of end-use relief. It is clear that that cannot happen. The industry and the Government need to continue to speak to each other to make it work better.

The final Budget matter I want to speak about is the sector deal. If the Chancellor could announce progress on that it would be phenomenal—excellent. I would be really pleased. If not, it would be good to know when a commitment is likely. My impression from speaking to those in the industry who worked on the deal is that they feel they worked together incredibly well on it. They feel that the proposal that has been put forward to the Government reflects the industry’s needs and requirements, so it would be positive if the Government brought it forward sooner rather than later.

I want to talk about “Vision 2035” and focus on the subject of the debate—the future of the oil and gas industry. I will not talk much about the industry downstream—I apologise to anyone involved in it—because I represent Aberdeen and because my hon. Friend the Member for Falkirk, who represents Grangemouth, and the hon. Member for Waveney have spoken about that important aspect of the industry. “Vision 2035” is the Oil & Gas Authority’s vision for securing the supply chain and the oil and gas industry in the north-east of Scotland to ensure that, in 2035, it still makes money for the Treasury, supports our local economy and provides jobs in the local area. That will happen only if the Government provide support now, including the stable fiscal regime that we spoke about earlier and support for the supply chain. They must talk positively about the industry, consider its asks, and make changes if need be.

The North sea field is a late-life asset—it is incredibly mature. It was one of the first fields in the world to reach that level of maturity, so our engineers who go out there are doing incredibly innovative things. They are working on enhanced oil recovery, bringing in tech in the supply chain, and using longer tiebacks so that small pools can be exploited. It is groundbreaking, world-leading stuff; this is the first time some of it has been done. If we get the technology right, we will be able to export it around the world even when there is no oil and gas in the North sea, but we must ensure that those companies stay anchored in the north-east of Scotland and the wider area.

The hon. Member for Gordon mentioned how many oil and gas companies he has in his constituency. I am sure he has more than I do, but I have the services that support those companies—two local authorities, the hospital and all the other vital things that the industry requires. As the hon. Member for West Aberdeenshire and Kincardine said, it is hon. Members from the north-east of Scotland and those who represent constituencies with oil and gas industries who come to speak in debates like this. I have taken part in many such debates in my time as a parliamentarian, and it is interesting that we and Conservative Members are largely asking for the same things: transferable tax history, the sector deal and support for the Oil & Gas Technology Centre, which is doing absolutely phenomenal work. Previously, we were asking for the Aberdeen city deal. We are calling for the same things because we all go out there and speak to people who work in the oil and gas industry, and the companies involved in it. We ask them what they need, and they say pretty consistently that the most important things are stability and predictability.

Support for exploration is also hugely important just now. Anything that can be done to encourage exploration and help big projects be signed off will be incredibly important. More big projects have been signed off in the past year than in the previous couple of years, which is hugely welcome news, but we need them to keep coming through the pipeline so that we can secure the future economic benefit.

Hon. Members in the Chamber largely speak with one voice and have the same asks for the oil and gas industry, but I sometimes feel like we do not make as much headway with Ministers in the Department for Business, Energy and Industrial Strategy and the Treasury as we could. I hope that the Minister hears everything we are asking for. We are all calling for the same things, because we are reflecting the voice of the industry. I would very much appreciate it if he would ask the Chancellor to make a clear commitment to a stable fiscal regime in the Budget. 12.34 pm

Dr Alan Whitehead (Southampton, Test) (Lab): We have had an excellent debate, with informed contributions all round, and I congratulate the hon. Member for Falkirk (John Mc Nally) on securing it. As hon. Members have said, this is a very important debate because the Budget is so close and because there are wider issues relating to the role that the oil and gas industry will play in a substantially decarbonised future. There are a number of assumptions about how oil and gas will be used in the future. As hon. Members have said, the debate is taking place literally the day after the IPCC published its report on global warming and its effects, and discussion about that report is just beginning. That must be the context for our discussions about the future of oil and gas.

As hon. Members, including the hon. Member for Kilmarnock and Loudoun (Alan Brown), have said, although the oil and gas industry in the North sea has recovered substantially from the miserable predictions and prognostications of 2014-15—it is estimated that production will be up 5% over the coming year, exploration is picking up, and various other indicators show that the industry is in a better shape than it has been in for quite a while—we must nevertheless be extremely wary
of assuming that happy days are here again, and that the industry can be the cash cow for the Budget that it has been perceived to be in years gone by. The industry’s long-term future is of a different order from anything that has happened in the past, so we should strike those thoughts from our minds. Although it will make a good return for the Exchequer in years to come, it should not be seen as a cash cow in the future.

I say that because we face a period in which the lessons of the downturn, up to the recent upturn, must be put in place to ensure the long-term future, prosperity and health of the industry as a whole. There has been a recent efficiency trend: development drilling has fallen substantially, but the costs of drilling have reduced substantially, and the average unit operating costs have halved from about $30 a barrel in 2014 to $15 a barrel now. Those tremendous efficiency gains will stand the sector in good stead for the challenges that lie ahead. We can use them to exploit small pools, which will be one of the staples of exploitation and development in the future.

It is unlikely that any new Brent fields will be discovered. In that context, we need to understand, as hon. Members said, that the North sea is not just a mature field but a very mature field: 43 billion barrels have been extracted, and there are perhaps about 10 billion to 20 billion barrels left to extract. Its future therefore needs to be in the best possible hands.

I commend the creation and operation of the Oil & Gas Authority and—hon. Members have mentioned it—“Vision 2035”, which the OGA is putting forward for the future of the industry. In that vision, it does not just talk about continuing business as usual, but looks at the much longer-term future, even beyond the point at which the very last reserves have been produced. One of the OGA’s missions is to create a sustainable energy service and technology centre long after the final economic reserves have been produced. We need to look not just at business as usual, but at a range of other things that the industry can start to develop, and is developing, as the North sea field becomes even more mature. Of course, one of the things it can do is develop decommissioning skills on a worldwide basis, so that we can ensure not just that the decommissioning in the North sea is done in the best possible way, but that those skills can be exported across the world.

We also need to contemplate a future of carbon capture and storage in the North sea and the use of decommissioning as a possible way forward to a position in which the North sea is not only producing oil and gas, but storing the carbon that comes from those processes and creating an industry so to do.

We need to be mindful of the fact that, as I mentioned at the beginning of my contribution, the IPCC report on global warming and the future of the world has just come out. It is pertinent to our discussions today, because it underpins what kind of long-term future there is for oil and gas. I consider that the long-term future involves looking at how oil and gas can be used in a range of ways that are not entirely familiar to us today but will be essential for the sinews of British industry. Oil and gas will have a substantial role to play, for a very long time, in those areas of activity. I am thinking of chemical products for which oil is irreplaceable and of alternative vectors such as hydrogen, if the CCS implications of the formation of hydrogen can be managed. All those things imply that there is a substantial future for oil and gas from the North sea.

We know—I am not talking off the top of my head here, I am referring to BEIS’s updated energy and emissions projections—that the demand for oil and gas in the UK economy is likely to go down substantially. Indeed, we can see that from looking at the 1990 figures, when there was a primary demand for oil of 87 megatonnes of oil equivalent and for natural gas of 97 megatonnes of oil equivalent. In the year when “Vision 2035” comes to fruition, the demand is projected to be something like 70 megatonnes of oil equivalent for oil and only 28 megatonnes of oil equivalent for gas.

There will be a substantial decline in demand, but that means, it seems to me, that the North sea can provide a secure UK supply for the declining demand over that period. It is surely best, for energy security purposes and many other reasons, to ensure that our supplies for the future come from the UK. That is the future that I want to see for the North sea oil and gas industry, by means of efficiency and by means of the innovative techniques mentioned this morning—the ways of managing a mature field so that it works in the best way possible in the national interest and in the interests of having very different future for oil and gas from what we have seen hitherto. We must ensure that it works for the UK and that it has a secure future. I hope that the Government will be able to join in that vision and provide support where necessary to underpin that innovation and those new methods of doing things, so that the oil and gas industry can be in the best shape possible to face that very different future.
I assure Members that Her Majesty’s Revenue and hon. Member for Falkirk relates to customs procedures, the Member for Waveney (Peter Aldous) and by the which is phenomenal. I know of no other single sector more than £330 billion in revenue to the Treasury, and we have. We are fully aware that the sector has paid that my Department has made that matter very clear to trade, on which the oil and gas industry has long Government fully understand the need for frictionless when things have been written off because of Brexit, in the past couple of years have happened in a time of us does. Many of the good things that have happened about today.

specific area that many hon. Members have spoken chain. I am very pleased to say that it is a United the importance for Northern Ireland of the supply industry has a lot going for it. Gas can play an important to reduce demand to meet our climate targets, but this for advice on our targets in the light of the new evidence. and we have asked the Committee on Climate Change meeting our Paris agreement climate change targets, our clean growth strategy is clear. We are focused on

To determine the industry’s potential, we obviously need responsibly regulated exploration, and the Government support that. There are a lot of challenges, and we understand that. The Government all realise that exploring and drilling for the upper reaches of the remaining resources is more difficult than doing so for the original resources—that is a statement of fact—and the measures that we have put in place since 2014 will contribute significantly towards that.

The focus of the debate is on the future. My hon. Friend the Member for Gordon (Colin Clark) mentioned the amount of mergers and acquisition activity over the past couple of years—about $8 billion-worth last year—with some significant investment involving new players to the basin. Divestment by some of the supermajors does not mean that they are losing interest; it is part of the natural order of a mature basin, with newer, smaller companies coming in. Shell is investing in new frontier areas, and BP’s development is moving well. There is huge potential.

Optimism is returning to the North sea. My hon. Friend the Member for Gordon (Colin Clark) mentioned Breaxit, which came up in a few of the contributions. I do not take it lightly, I assure you, Mr Hollobone—none of us does. Many of the good things that have happened in the past couple of years have happened in a time when things have been written off because of Breaxit, but I want to say to the hon. Lady and others that the Government fully understand the need for frictionless trade, on which the oil and gas industry has long depended, whether in the movement of goods, services or people. I assure her and other interested Members that my Department has made that matter very clear to other parts of Government—it is our job to do that, and we have. We are fully aware that the sector has paid more than £330 billion in revenue to the Treasury, which is phenomenal. I know of no other single sector that has been as beneficial to the Government over the past half-century.

The end-use facility mentioned by my hon. Friend the Member for Waveney (Peter Aldous) and by the hon. Member for Falkirk relates to customs procedures. I assure Members that Her Majesty’s Revenue and Customs continues to discuss with the sector the possibility of future mitigations being available, and which ones. The issue is complex, and I cannot claim to understand the full detail.

Since 2014, it is fair to say that the industry has had a torrid time as a result of the collapse in the price of oil. From that point of view, I am pleased that the price has gone up, but what I realised on my visit to Aberdeen was that, despite the decision of the industry and its contraction—a statement of fact about the number of employees and so on, as was explained to me—good things resulted as well, such as some new technologies.

I remain optimistic for the future. I feel that the tripartite approach between the OGA, industry and Government, which hon. Members mentioned, is particularly important. I am pleased that, since its establishment, an extra 3.7 billion barrels have been forecast, and production has risen by 16% since 2014 figures, with a reduction in the production costs. The issue was forced by what happened to the price, but those cost reductions will remain and be improved on.

From that point of view, I am pleased that the price has gone up, but what I realised on my visit to Aberdeen was that, despite the decision of the industry and its contraction—a statement of fact about the number of employees and so on, as was explained to me—good things resulted as well, such as some new technologies.
[Richard Harrington]

assessing the value for money of the amount of contribution expected in the deal from Government, which takes more time than people think.

This is a complex industry with a great future. My hon. Friend the Member for Banff and Buchan said that it is an industry with a lot going on, and we know that the Government, the industry and the Members who have spoken today will be an important part of its future.

Dr Whitehead: On a point of order, Mr Hollobone. I may have misled the Chamber inadvertently by quoting a statistic erroneously. On the estimates for natural gas usage in 2035, the figure should be 59 megatonnes of oil equivalent and not 29, as I believe I said in my speech.

Mr Philip Hollobone (in the Chair): Thank you for correcting the record.

12.55 pm

John McNally: I thank the Minister for his kind and generous comments. All Members have been supportive of the debate. Many points were made about how vital this industry is to the economy in the transition to renewable and sustainable energy in the future. We are all agreed that we need a stable regime in place so that we are all aware of what will happen for the future of the industry. The points made about short-termism were excellent. We seem to have been practising short-termism for decade after decade, and that has to stop.

I particularly liked the emphasis on safety in the North sea and on how important it is to retain skilled, clever and well-trained workers. I was not actually around at the time of the Piper Alpha disaster—I was running businesses at the time the news started to come out. I was terrified, as everyone else was, and I read the papers and listened to the news to find out whose friend or relative had been killed and who had been injured. The long-term consequences of that disaster, such as post-traumatic stress, are still going on today. That should never be allowed to happen as long as we are in charge of safety, so the emphasis on safety is appreciated.

The basic thing that most people like in their life is the right to feel safe and secure at home. Crime and antisocial behaviour are expected to pay the highest price. Surely, it is not too much to say that in our modern society, everyone has the right to feel safe and secure at home.

I represent everyone in my constituency whose life has been made a misery by antisocial behaviour. My constituents and I have clear demands and expectations for the Minister that I hope will be listened to carefully and addressed. I want the Government to reverse the 31% funding cuts they have made to Humberside police since 2010. Will the Government follow Labour’s lead by committing to a fully funded statutory youth service, change the school accountability system and increase funding for schools to stop an increasing number of children being off-rolled and excluded? Will they increase funding for social workers and early intervention programmes by increasing the children’s services budget and support community groups with grassroots solutions to antisocial behaviour?

Some people dismiss antisocial behaviour as a mere nuisance, but not me. Crime and antisocial behaviour affect people of all incomes and backgrounds, but unfortunately it seems that the poorest and the most vulnerable are always disproportionately affected. Although antisocial behaviour may be a different category of crime from those that capture the headlines in our national newspapers, it still has a huge impact on the lives of my constituents. One, whose property was vandalised, told me that she worries “what the next level is, for the perpetrators. What will they do next, where and to whom? Whilst I realise, it’s just to property and not to humans, it’s what it represents, in our society.”

One young man was subjected to daily shouting and swearing from a neighbour and her friend. They damaged his car and personal belongings, constantly banged on his door at all hours of the days, and intimidated him by approaching him when he was outside and looking into his flat’s window when he was inside. That young man had severe mental health problems and was attempting independent living for the first time. This antisocial behaviour caused a huge setback for him. My constituent Chris from Hessle contacted me today to share the frustration and anger of the biker community at the high number of motorbike thefts. The police used to run an operation called Yellowfin, but everything has had to be reduced because of funding cuts.

The first reaction of most people to antisocial behaviour would be to call the police. Before the summer recess, I spent a morning with Humberside police. Whenever I spend time with our public servants, be they nurses,
doctors, firefighters or others, I am always amazed by how dedicated they are to their vocation and to helping people. The police were no exception. I hope hon. Members join me in giving special thanks to Inspector Kirsty Tock, who is in my thoughts at this particularly difficult time for her. If it was up to them, all police officers would work every case until they were solved to the victims’ satisfaction, but unfortunately we live in a world of limited resources. Because of the decisions made by this Government, those resources are getting more limited.

Since 2010, Humberside police’s budget has been cut by 31%. In reality, that means 392 fewer officers and 54 fewer police community support officers. In order to service 999 calls, officers and resources are being diverted away from neighbourhood policing because there are simply not enough police officers to do it all. We understand that high-quality, well-resourced neighbourhood policing is vital to deal with antisocial behaviour. Officers who know the area and who know the children and families who need support are crucial to identify when intervention is needed and to gather evidence so that there are consequences for antisocial behaviour. That policing model is broken, because of the cuts. The police have to divert their neighbourhood policing team to deal with 999 emergencies. We need enough police to do both.

The visible police presence in our communities has shrunk and police stations have disappeared. A notable example in my constituency is the complete lack of a policing model. Since 2010, Humberside’s budget has been cut by 31%. In reality, that means 392 fewer officers and 54 fewer police community support officers. In order to service 999 calls, officers and resources are being diverted away from neighbourhood policing because there are simply not enough police officers to do it all. We understand that high-quality, well-resourced neighbourhood policing is vital to deal with antisocial behaviour. Officers who know the area and who know the children and families who need support are crucial to identify when intervention is needed and to gather evidence so that there are consequences for antisocial behaviour. That policing model is broken, because of the cuts. The police have to divert their neighbourhood policing team to deal with 999 emergencies. We need enough police to do both.

I do not hold any police officer or PCSO responsible for the rise in antisocial behaviour. I blame the Government and their deliberate choice to cut our public sector—a policy that they have pursued with relish since 2010. In fact, I wholly support our police services; I am as disgusted as they are with the pathetic pay increase that they have just been given. I support an increased police presence, but I do not believe that increasing police numbers will magically solve all the problems associated with antisocial behaviour. In west Hull and Hessle, when the police deal with an antisocial behaviour problem, that problem just moves somewhere else in the constituency. A holistic approach is needed to tackle the problem.

Jim Shannon (Strangford) (DUP): I congratulate the hon. Lady on bringing forward the debate. I am interested in the issue of antisocial behaviour and I want to suggest some possible solutions. In my constituency, there were high levels of antisocial misbehaviour over a period of time. We took an initiative from the churches, which came together in concern for their community to work alongside a faith-based group called Street Pastors. In conjunction with the council, the police and social services, they have endeavoured to bring antisocial misbehaviour levels down, and they have succeeded. I suggest the Street Pastors initiative to the hon. Lady as something that is outside the normal sphere of what is on offer, and I would be happy to send her the details. I think that initiatives that come from people within the community can achieve change.

Emma Hardy: I thank the hon. Gentleman for his intervention and I will certainly look into that initiative.

One of the most striking things about the antisocial behaviour in my constituency, especially in Hessle, is the number of constituents who report young people as the cause. Although this issue is not exclusively about young people, antisocial behaviour tends to be carried out by younger people. Earlier this year, I co-sponsored a Bill brought forward by my hon. Friend the Member for Brighton, Kemptown (Lloyd Russell-Moyle) to make youth services provision statutory. In his speech to bring in the Bill, my hon. Friend quoted a 2016 survey that found “600 youth centres had closed around the country, 3,500 youth workers had lost their jobs, and 140,000 places for young people had been lost... In 2010 we spent £1.2 billion on youth work, youth services and related youth activity; last year we spent £358 million...a 68% cash-terms cut.”—[Official Report, 6 June 2018: Vol. 642, c. 314.]

A parent of a child who has been involved in some antisocial behaviour contacted me to ask me for help. She asked, “Where can my child go? What services are out there? What support can I have?” Youth services provide a vital role in supporting young people across the country. They are described by Anna Barker, chair of the British Youth Council, as “a supportive place for young people to become a force for good in society”. When I look at incredible youth services like The Warren and Hessle youth club, I completely agree. Our youth services have been targeted for budget cuts, which have created the conditions in which crime can thrive, leaving young people vulnerable to violence and denied the opportunity to build a positive future. I am glad that Labour has promised to consult on making those services statutory. I plead with the Minister to look at doing the same.

The Minister will be pleased to know that I am not just asking for more money, but for a change in attitude through a change in policy. As a member of the Education Committee, I am deeply concerned about the increasing number of children being excluded and off-rolled from our schools. A recent study proved that dozens of schools exclude more than one in five children. Those children are not leaving school for a high-quality education somewhere else, but are often found wandering around public spaces in our cities. They have been written off by society at a young age. Is it really a shock that their anger is felt as antisocial behaviour?

The double whammy of this Government’s school accountability system and school funding cuts of £2.8 billion since 2015 have the unintended consequence of driving perverse behaviour by schools to try to remove children who are less likely to achieve and more expensive to educate. A report by the Education Policy Institute found that one in four children referred to children and adolescent mental health services in England is rejected, and that school staff are required to respond to children who self-harm, despite cuts to support services. How effectively does the Minister think schools will be able to support pupils with the staffing cuts they face? What does the Minister think will happen to our children who do not get the support they need in their formative years? We need a new accountability system that values all children, and schools need the funding to support every child.

Good social work can transform people’s lives, protect them from harm and help stop the increase in antisocial behaviour. Helping children and young people to fulfil their potential is a key ambition of all councils, but our
children's services are under increasing pressure. They face a funding gap of around £2 billion by 2020, yet demand for their services has never been higher. Councils seek to support children to live with their families where possible through family-based support and early intervention.

Early intervention is crucial, but how can councils provide it when Government funding for the early intervention grant has been cut by almost £500 million since 2013 and is projected to drop by a further £183 million by 2020? Our councils need more money for early intervention. We can never prove statistically that early intervention prevented someone from engaging in antisocial behaviour, but we can certainly feel what happens in our communities when those services are cut—problems with antisocial behaviour increase.

The Government should follow Labour’s lead and make it easier for tenants and residents associations to come together to deal with antisocial behaviour in their own streets. DARTS in my constituency—each letter represents a different street off Hessle Road—is the perfect example of a tenants and residents association. DARTS is led by Peter and Trevor, who are brilliant, properly no-nonsense people who came together to tackle antisocial behaviour in their area. They get amazing results. I would love there to be a DARTS group in every area of Hull, but Hull City Council has lost one pound in every three since 2010, which has meant cuts to services. It is harder for councils to offer the support that is needed to get such groups up and running—and I am yet to work out how to clone Peter and Trevor.

The Government’s short-sighted and narrow-minded obsession with austerity has created the perfect climate for antisocial behaviour to thrive. Undoing the damage that has been done to communities such as west Hull and Hessle will take time and investment—there is no quick fix. However, if the Minister truly believes austerity is over, she should properly fund and equip our police force and reverse the 31% cut to the Humberside police budget; make youth services statutory, fund them and train youth workers; fund our schools and CAMHS; change the accountability system to stop the unintended consequences of increased exclusions and off-rolling; increase funding for social workers and investment in early intervention; and properly fund councils to support local residents groups to solve problems in their own communities.

I hope the Minister does not insult me or my constituents by claiming that Humberside police have all the money they need, because that simply is not true. I also hope she does not claim that antisocial behaviour is not on the rise. I am sure she is as aware as I am of the number of dropped calls to the 101 service and the number of incidents that actually get reported. If she goes out and talks to people in the community, she will find that most of them never even bother ringing 101 to report antisocial behaviour, because they know they may be on hold for more than 40 minutes.

My constituents and I have had enough. Antisocial behaviour causes problems for nearly everyone in my constituency. We expect action and serious investment. I repeat that we need a holistic approach to dealing with this problem—it’s causes as well as its consequences. I am afraid we will hold the Government to account if they fail to do anything.

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for the Home Department (Victoria Atkins): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Mr Hollobone. I congratulate the hon. Member for Kingston upon Hull West and Hessle (Emma Hardy) on securing this debate about a matter that I know is of huge importance to her and her constituents—particularly those who are suffering in the way she so eloquently described. She made a wide-ranging speech, and I will try to respond to as many of her points as I can. I hope she understands that I do not have the details of those that concern other Departments immediately to hand, but I will ask the relevant Minister to write to her about any points to which I do not manage to respond.

Anyone who represents a constituency knows just how terrible antisocial behaviour can be. The hon. Lady will never hear me diminish its impact. Individual incidents sometimes have the most extraordinary effect on communities. So-called low-level behaviour may not seem that significant, but if it develops into a pattern of behaviour it becomes incredibly wearing for those who have to live with it day in, day out. Antisocial behaviour can be anything from people running amok, swearing at people or frightening residents to drunken and drug-related harassment, intimidating behaviour, and noisy and abusive neighbours. All those things can have a profound and debilitating effect on the people we were elected to serve.

That is why the Government gave the police, local authorities and local agencies a range of flexible powers to keep the public safe through the Anti-social Behaviour, Crime and Policing Act 2014. We fully agree that antisocial behaviour is not just a policing issue, important though policing is in this context. Solutions must often be part of a holistic approach that draws in local authorities and other agencies. We expect those agencies to respond and use those powers flexibly to protect their communities from all types of antisocial behaviour. However, where antisocial behaviour tips over into far more serious offending that is clearly criminal—the hon. Lady will know that serious violence and other forms of criminal behaviour fall within my portfolio—we expect the police and others to use the full force of the law to bring people to justice through the criminal justice system.

The 2014 Act provides six flexible powers, which are designed to enable the police and local authorities to respond quickly to antisocial behaviour in their communities and stop it reoccurring. Those powers include court orders to stop the behaviour of the most antisocial people, powers to close premises that are a magnet for trouble, and powers to stop antisocial behaviour in public places. They also include measures such as civil injunctions, which are interesting because they do not just prohibit people from engaging in certain behaviour, but can place positive requirements on perpetrators to address the underlying causes of their antisocial behaviour.

Sadly, there are themes that run through the backgrounds of many of the young people who fall into my portfolio. Domestic abuse is a particularly strong theme, and I am concentrating on protecting direct victims of domestic abuse and on the ramifications for young people who are vulnerable to being ensnared by criminal gangs of witnessing domestic abuse in the home and being desensitised to violence outside the home. The Government

1.13 pm
and I am looking at many themes to address the background factors that feature in the lives of many young people who behave in an antisocial or indeed criminal way.

Other types of order, such as community protection notices and criminal behaviour orders, are directed at the most harmful behaviour. Local authorities also have the power to impose public spaces protection orders to protect public spaces from antisocial behaviour and nuisance, and the police can use their dispersal power to direct any individual who engages in antisocial behaviour away from a particular place.

Emma Hardy: Those powers have been used effectively in Hull, but the Minister will recall—I have spoken about this previously—that they just move the problem somewhere else in the city. We can use only so many of those orders, and they just seem to make the problem appear somewhere else. It is like a game of whack-a-mole—we do not seem to be able to whack them all down at the same time. I was heartened to hear her mention looking at the causes of domestic violence. I wonder whether she will say a little about what we are doing to prevent antisocial behaviour from happening in the first place—not just to deal with it when we see it through criminal convictions, but to look at its causes and how we can stop them.

Victoria Atkins: I was about to come to that, so I apologise for incorporating my answer into my speech. We want to give people on the ground the ability to use those powers as they feel is appropriate in their local community. The hon. Lady will understand that the challenges in her inner-city area are very different from those in my area of Lincolnshire, which is just down the road from her area but is very rural. Although we have antisocial behaviour, I suspect it takes a different form from that in a city centre, given the local geography and so on.

The Government want to give local people the powers to respond in the most effective way in their local area. Indeed, in December last year we published refreshed guidance on the use of those powers by councils, police officers and so on—we understood that some councils were using PSPOs in particular in a way that was perhaps not intended by Parliament, so we refreshed the guidance to help local councillors. A couple of months ago I spoke to local councillors at the Local Government Association to help them with that.

The hon. Lady asked me about a community response. She will know that as part of the serious violence strategy we are pulling together across all Government Departments, along with local government colleagues, the Mayor of London, police and crime commissioners and Mayors across the country, to try to have a more joined-up approach to serious violence. That will have a beneficial effect on lower-level offending behaviour as well, because if we can help young people with issues at home, mental health issues and so on, as she described, that will have an impact on their behaviour generally. That is why I am delighted that not only are we helping the Vulcan Learning Centre, a local charity in Hull, through the knife crime community fund, which will help local children who are perhaps falling into crime. There is also a bigger, national effort through the early intervention fund for young people announced in the serious violence strategy as well as the endowment fund that the Home Secretary announced last week—£200 million that will be invested in long-term projects to help young people across the county. A great deal of work is going on.

The hon. Lady rightly mentioned concerns about children who are not in full-time education but are perhaps in alternative provision. The Government have commissioned a review by Edward Timpson, the former Care Minister, who has a great understanding on a personal and professional level of the issues facing looked-after children or those in alternative provision. He is looking at alternative provision through the schooling system to see what is working, what is not and what we need to improve. Again, through my work in other areas, I know that that can have an enormous impact on children’s behaviour and their ability to lead productive lives.

If I may, I will let the hon. Lady know about the ability of victims of antisocial behaviour, or someone acting on their behalf, including a Member of Parliament, to request a formal antisocial behaviour case review—I do not know whether she is aware of this—which is called a “community trigger.” I like talking about it, because colleagues should be aware of it and they can use it if requested by their constituents. It enables victims of antisocial behaviour to ensure that their voice is heard when they believe they have not had a satisfactory response to repeated complaints of antisocial behaviour, and it forces agencies to act. The relevant bodies in a local area must agree on and publish their case review procedures. Therefore, if she believes that the relevant agencies in her constituency have not acted on reports of antisocial behaviour in Hull and the East Riding, that is a possible solution for her constituents. I note that her police and crime commissioner cited tackling antisocial behaviour as a priority in his policing plan, so perhaps she can ask him what he is doing to fulfil that pledge to the electorate.

The hon. Lady mentioned the police station in Hessle. Again, that is a decision taken by the PCC, so I hope she will forgive me if I do not comment on it. She also mentioned funding, and I think she said that we “relish” austerity. We really do not. I am always careful not to revisit history in too much detail because, apart from anything else, we should be forward-looking, but the situation in 2010 was that as a country we had run out of money and we had to start to live within our means. That meant we had to take very serious, tough decisions on funding. She will know that the then Home Secretary—now the Prime Minister—insisted that police funding be protected from 2015 onwards, and that last year, as part of the preparations for the police funding formula exercise that happens at the end of every year, the Minister for Policing and the Fire Service spoke to every constabulary in the country to ask them what they needed. Through that process, with the help of PCCs, we are able to put a further £460 million into policing this year. I am pleased that that means an increase of £4 million for Humberside constabulary, and it has managed to add 153 officers to its cadre since March last year.

Emma Hardy: I am sure the Minister recognises, as everyone out there does, that the number of criminal incidents is increasing, and the cuts have not stopped yet. She talks about the Government giving with one
hand, but they are surely taking with the other, because there is still another £14 million to £17 million of savings to be found in the next few years. That will result in job losses for our PCSOs, which will have an impact on antisocial behaviour. I am sure she recognises that.

Victoria Atkins: I invite the hon. Lady to speak to her PCC—she is not just entitled to do that; it is part of all our duties to hold our PCCs to account. As of March last year—the last figures I have available—her police and crime commissioner had reserves of £34.3 million. To put that in context, the reserves as a percentage of total cash funding for 2017-18 were 20%, which is 5% higher than the average for England and Wales. She could ask her PCC what he is doing with that money.

Emma Hardy: The Minister has been generous in giving way. In fact, I meet with the PCC regularly and talked to him about the reserves only last week. They are currently being used to try to increase the number of police officers we have, to mitigate the cuts seen since 2010. I am sure by next year the reserves will not be there any longer.

Victoria Atkins: That is a matter for the police and crime commissioner. We brought in police and crime commissioners in 2012 precisely to give a local person the power to hold the police and chief constable to account and to spend the police budget in ways they feel are priorities for their local electorate.

As I say, we are injecting more money into policing this year. The Home Secretary has very much listened to the chiefs and police and crime commissioners across the country. We know that policing is changing and that pressures on the police through different crime types are developing. Ten years ago, online child sexual exploitation did not feature, but now, sadly, as the Home Secretary laid out in his recent speech, it is an incredible pressure on policing.

I am conscious of the time, Mr Hollobone, and I do not know whether the hon. Lady wishes to sum up. If she does, I will sit down in a moment. Again, I invite her and colleagues around the House to speak to their local councils about innovative ideas on how to engage young people and help young people who are at risk of falling into trouble.

Yesterday, we had the first of the Home Office’s national programme of engagement events on the serious violence strategy here in London. We had a fantastic turn-out from councils across the capital, including the deputy Mayor for policing in London. I listened carefully to the chief executive of Islington Council, who gave some really interesting ideas on what it has done to protect youth services—what it is doing is really innovative. I urge all colleagues to engage in that conversation with their local councils, because there are some really innovative ideas.

Mr Philip Hollobone (in the Chair): Order. I am afraid that the Member in charge does not have the right of reply. This is now the second time I have been in this Chamber when the Minister has been badly advised. We are going to have to get some advice to Whitehall Departments that in a half-hour debate the Member in charge does not have the right of reply.

Victoria Atkins: Mr Hollobone, I feel honour-bound to say that it is my mistake. Please direct your understandable consternation towards me, not the officials. That is my fault, and I apologise profusely.

Question put and agreed to.

Resolved,

That this House has considered anti-social behaviour in Hull and the East Riding of Yorkshire.

1.30 pm

Sitting suspended.
Mr Wragg: The right hon. Gentleman is correct. The actions of the banks are entirely indefensible. It is, I hope, for the Government to seek appropriate redress.

While the *Hansard* column inches increase, meaningful actions to properly investigate business banking fraud and seek redress for its victims have been woefully insufficient so far. I would like to turn attention to the investigation of allegations of fraud by our crime prevention agencies and regulators, to the role of financial institutions, and to the role the Government play.

As a nation, we pride ourselves on the rule of law. Above the Old Bailey stands the gilded statue of Lady Justice. She carries the sword of justice in one hand and the scales of justice in the other. She wears a blindfold to symbolise that justice is blind and does not distinguish between the powerful and the weak. Yet for those who have been the victims of the systematic fraud practised by UK banks and financial institutions, such sentiment is nonsense. The statue representing their experience of justice would be heavily rusted rather than gilded. It would wear a blindfold to avoid having to see the activities of the financial institutions whose wrongdoing has ruined individuals and families, and its arms would be firmly tied behind its back to symbolise the lack of activity by both the police and the regulators.

It is 10 years this week since the taxpayer bailed out the financial services sector, and the state continues to control a significant stake in certain institutions. Ten years on, confidence in the sector is low, particularly among small and medium-sized enterprises. The nation has yet to fully recover from a decade that saw the destruction of viable businesses, jobs and thousands of individual lives as banks frantically rebuilt their balance sheets following the crash, at the expense of their customers’ financial wellbeing and their own reputations. We need to be clear: the process of shoring up a balance sheet is a zero-sum game. For every winner there is a loser. The losers here were small and medium-sized enterprises, the backbone of our economy. They lost because they did not have the resource or the legal firepower they needed, or a system to support them.

We are not saying that every SME business that folded over the last decade was viable, nor that every business was the victim of fraud. But we have seen clear evidence of tampering with documents, false witness statements and the leveraging of a position of power and clout to drive many thousands of good businesses into insolvency. In a free economy there will always be legitimate failures alongside legitimate successes. Many businesses may not have been viable and may not have survived, but that did not make them fair game for mistreatment or, even worse, fraud. It just made them easy targets.

Mr Jack: Is my hon. Friend aware that in one year alone the Global Restructuring Group division of RBS made over £1 billion in profit? He says that some of these businesses may have failed, but rightly points out that a lot of them were viable and had a lot of hidden assets.

Mr Wragg: My hon. Friend is absolutely correct about the role of GRG.

Following the cases of, at times, blatant mistreatment and fraud, which we saw consistently and across the board, there is either a lack of willingness or lack of...
capability from our investigative bodies, both civil and criminal, to pursue complaints. Instead, the victims of mistreatment and fraud are left to go round in circles making a series of fruitless complaints. The complaints are either made directly to the institutions that defrauded them in the first place, which have a vested interest not to investigate properly—as was the case with my constituent and the Royal Bank of Scotland—or referred to a series of industry-led trade bodies or the Financial Conduct Authority, which does not take on individual cases. It is simply not good enough.

The only successful prosecution for fraud thus far has been that of HBOS in Reading. That was not down to the actions of our regulator or the Serious Fraud Office relentlessly pursuing the truth to bring the perpetrators to justice. Indeed, the bank—first as HBOS and then as Lloyds, after the takeover—insisted there was no fraud, despite there being a victim with losses in the hundreds of millions of pounds.

Mr Steve Baker (Wycombe) (Con): I want to put on record my personal admiration for the police and crime commissioner for Thames Valley, Anthony Stansfeld, who personally saw to it that the fraud was prosecuted.

I hope that my hon. Friend will agree that the current situation is not good enough. If the state is to fulfil its responsibility to silence whistleblowers.

Kevin Brennan (Cardiff West) (Lab): I endorse what has been said about Anthony Stansfeld.

Does the hon. Gentleman agree that this is not just about RBS, as some people seem to think? My constituent, Mike McGrath, went out of business because of his treatment by Lloyds bank.

Mr Wragg: My hon. Friend hits the nail on the head. I pay tribute to the police and crime commissioner, but I also wish to pay tribute to a couple of people who believe are here in the Gallery today. Instead of the authorities investigating, it was left to a couple of music producers from Cambridge, Paul and Nikki Turner, to crack the case. I hope they are here in Parliament. They are still fighting for compensation for other victims of the crime.

Mr Wragg: The hon. Gentleman is absolutely correct: it was systemic across the whole business lending sector. He is right to put that on the record.

The Turners approached the Financial Standards Authority, the Serious Fraud Office and the Treasury. Indeed, there was a debate in this very room in June 2009, during which Members urged the authorities to investigate. However, all they encountered was denial and deflection. As my hon. Friend the Member for Wycombe (Mr Baker) pointed out, the case was eventually taken seriously only after Thames Valley police recognised that a crime had been committed. The investigation took seven years to complete and the resource of 151 officers and staff, and it cost £7 million, with only £2 million eventually recovered from the Home Office. Thames Valley police stated that they could have done it in half the time and for half the money, if only the bank had co-operated fully. Unfortunately, the scale and difficulty of investigating the fraud only serves as a warning to other cash-strapped police forces: “Investigate at your peril”.

The reality is that white-collar crimes such as this are expensive and difficult to prosecute, and the agencies responsible for fighting economic crime simply do not have the necessary resources to tackle complex, mid-tier banking fraud. The SFO takes on only a small number of very large cases and has a budget of £53 million. The National Crime Agency’s economic crime command has a budget of £10 million, and the newly established National Economic Crime Centre has a budget of just £6 million. Compared with the sheer scale of fraud in the United Kingdom, which is estimated at more than £190 billion a year, and given the potential for consequential losses, these investigative budgets are, frankly, insignificant.

For those who may think that this is a one-off, it is important to note that the processes employed by HBOS in this case—turnaround units, business valuations and the use of insolvency—are exactly the same tactics seen in the case of other complaints that the all-party parliamentary group on fair business banking has investigated. Such complaints were found to be commonplace, as the hon. Member for Cardiff West (Kevin Brennan) alluded to, across most financial institutions. The system is ripe for abuse, and we have serious concerns about it.

At this point, I pay tribute to the incredible dedication of the co-chairs of the all-party group, my hon. Friend the Member for Thirsk and Malton (Kevin Hollinrake) and the right hon. Member for North Norfolk (Norman Lamb). In addition, I thank the group’s officers and members for their significant work in running a thorough inquiry into how so many SMEs were abused by their banks, exposing the scale of the issue and the mechanisms by which the frauds were conducted. The APPG has produced an important report that identifies the shortcomings in the current investigative tools and bodies and makes vital recommendations as to how we might start to unpick this sorry mess.

I reiterate the APPG’s calls for a full public inquiry into the treatment of businesses by financial institutions. There are currently more than 10 different inquiries looking at different, isolated issues. It is time that we had a holistic approach and investigated the system as a whole.

Vicky Ford (Chelmsford) (Con): I thank my hon. Friend for his work in this area. Two of my constituents have been affected—one through a mis-selling of swaps by RBS and the other through the dreadful situation at HBOS that my hon. Friend has mentioned. Does he
agree that the tragedy of this case is partly the lack of transparency and independence, and that people feel that they cannot get fair redress? A decade later they are still not being treated fairly by those institutions.

Mr Wragg: My hon. Friend is spot on. The level of obfuscation by these institutions would be quite suspicious if one were to suspect them of any wrongdoing. I am sure that we can deduce our own conclusions from their behaviour.

On a civil level, the APPG’s proposal for a financial services tribunal has been well received, and we look forward to the Government’s response. That may at least provide a civil remedy for those who have been wronged. However, we have been asked what will happen when civil mistreatment tips over into the criminal abuse of power. Where is there to go? At this point, there is no satisfactory answer. The Thames Valley police and crime commissioner believes that we should have regional fraud squads akin to our counter-terrorism squads, funded by the Treasury via FCA fines and funds recovered from criminal gangs. We wholeheartedly support those proposals. Whatever action is taken, it requires the utmost degree of urgency, so that more and more cases do not—as has already started to happen—run into statutes of limitations, lose documents and evidence to the sands of time or see responsible and culpable individuals leave the industry and witnesses become unavailable.

I look forward to Members’ contributions and the Minister’s response. As I mentioned at the start, this is becoming an all too familiar debate, and I rather hope that we are not all back here in six months reliving it again. I also hope that we can resolve to agree a path of action that will see the tarnish start to be scrubbed off Lady Justice and allow her to start to uncross her arms.

4.46 pm

Jo Stevens (Cardiff Central) (Lab): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Mr Robertson. I thank the hon. Member for Hazel Grove (Mr Wragg) for securing the debate. It is a pleasure to speak after him. I have raised the plight of my constituent, Mr Kashif Shabir, for many years. His case is about corporate collusion between Lloyds bank and a firm of receivers in Bristol, Alder King, which was embedded in the bank’s recovery department and effectively destroyed businesses to pick up work for itself.

I led a debate here in September 2016 concerning the role of the SFO, and there was a second debate here in April 2017 about the role of the Royal Institution of Chartered Surveyors as an adequate regulator. Both debates followed a March 2014 Select Committee inquiry into the regulation and policies of the insolvency sector. There have also been many other debates, as has been referenced. The HBOS six have been jailed, the Turnbull six have been jailed, the A von and A von and the banking ombudsman said they had no locus to investigate it. The police have refused to properly investigate this fraud. Mr Stansfeld has had to write to that constabulary to ask it to look into the case based on the evidence that he has seen.

My constituent’s experience is a case study in the cynicism and arrogance with which Lloyds refuses to right the effects of its wrongdoing, and of the ineffectiveness of organisations such as the FCA, the police and the regulators that are supposed to oversee and enforce the integrity and honesty of businesses in this country. Mr Shabir has been fighting Lloyds bank for 10 years. As far back as 2011, Lloyds acknowledged fault by making an offer of settlement—the bank would not pursue him for the balance of losses, which it had itself created, in return for a gagging order. Mr Shabir quite rightly refused to sign up to that.

Subsequent approaches by Mr Shabir, myself and many people working on his behalf to both Lloyds and Alder King have either been ignored or met with deliberate stonewalling tactics, because those organisations know that they hold the power in this relationship. Their actions have impoverished hundreds of businesspeople, who cannot sue, because they cannot afford to litigate. The banks and others know that and are taking advantage of it.

At the same time, Lloyds has openly stated that it will co-operate and work with the APPG on fair business banking, but we know that, in reality, the opposite is true. If the bank cannot settle with a victim to whom it has already made an offer, even if that offer is derisory, it is clear that that stance is completely disingenuous. In such instances one would expect the regulators to redress those shortcomings, and investigators and prosecutors to look at them. As we have heard, however, they have not done so far.

In the September 2016 debate, I asked the Solicitor General to look at this and explain the threshold for prosecution. He outlined the criteria and the threshold for prosecuting, and said that these cases would not reach that threshold. We know, however, that while individually none of these cases will reach the FCA’s prosecution threshold, collectively they will.

My hon. Friend the Member for Norwich South (Clive Lewis) summed up the matter well in the debate in the main Chamber in January:

We do know that 90% of GRG-administered businesses never made it back to mainstream banking...The cost is immeasurable, but we believe it to be in the tens of billions...If it is indeed that big, it may be the largest theft anywhere, ever.”—[Official Report, 18 January 2018; Vol. 634, c. 1086.]

If that does not meet the criteria for an SFO investigation, I do not know what does. Why is it not investigating? We have heard many times that hundreds of victims of this fraud have lost large sums individually and collectively.

Mr Shabir tells me that there has never been a rejection of his complaint on the evidential merits; it has been purely on the basis of the threshold. The Avon and Somerset police economic crime team refused to investigate the case, because it said it had already been investigated by other bodies. The Royal Institution of Chartered Surveyors turned it down. The Financial Conduct Authority and the banking ombudsman said they had no locus to investigate it. The police have refused to properly investigate this fraud. Mr Stansfeld has had to write to that constabulary to ask it to look into the case based on the evidence that he has seen.

Mr Shabir will not go away, and nor will the other victims. Whatever the shortcomings of the regulators, investigators and prosecutors, they must not detract from the main issue, which is the fraudulent actions of the banks and the question of where the responsibility for such actions ultimately lies. It lies with Lloyds bank and RBS. It is time for the people in charge of those organisations to take responsibility for their actions.
4.52 pm

Paul Masterton (East Renfrewshire) (Con): I congratulate my hon. Friend the Member for Hazel Grove (Mr Wragg) on raising this important issue. It is a shame that he continues to have to do so.

Several of my constituents have been adversely affected by the unscrupulous behaviour of the banks mentioned today. I want to bring attention to the despicable actions of Clydesdale bank, which has not been mentioned, under the tutelage of its parent company National Australia bank.

The NAB Customer Support Group was set up by a small group of SMEs that were crippled by long-term, fixed-rate loans made via tailored business loans issued by the Clydesdale and Yorkshire banks. Many of the businesses have closed down, but most are struggling to survive, burdened by unmanageable interest rates and unable to break from the fixed rate due to extortionate breakage penalties of up to 40% of the loan, arising from the bank’s alleged signing of interest rate swap agreements with third parties.

The bank charges costs arising from exiting embedded interest rate swaps via the small print in the terms and conditions. However, with the passing of time, the bank admitted that there were no such micro-hedges, or match hedges, in place and that all interest rate risk was dealt with by the parent company, National Australia bank. The uncontrolled promotion of these products—driven, as always, by generous commissions—has caused enormous damage to the SME sector and the wider economy, especially in Scotland, including the west of Scotland.

Members of the support group are here today, including my constituent Ian Lightbody, and their objective is to bring the bank to account for the damage it has caused and to persuade or force it to apply satisfactory redress to all affected SMEs. Over the past few years, the FCA has been shown to be impotent. That must change, particularly now that some of these cases are so serious that even Police Scotland feels they merit investigation.

In June 2014, representatives of Clydesdale bank appeared before the Treasury Committee. The bank’s evidence was weak and, to be frank, misleading—apparently, with the benefit of hindsight, deliberately so. It said it would investigate fixed-rate tailored business loans, but it investigated only cases where a complaint was already live or had previously been made. That meant that around 7,500 people were not contacted or given the opportunity to have their loan investigated. The bank’s chief executive officer confirmed to the Treasury Committee that he did not believe that his bank’s tailored business loans were deliberately designed to avoid FCA regulation. However, the Committee’s subsequent report, “Conduct and Competition in SME Lending”, concluded:

“The lack of public oversight, minimal transparency and limited coverage of the scheme mean that the Committee cannot be confident that Clydesdale’s separate internal review will deliver outcomes equivalent to the FCA review upon which it is intended to be based.”

The report went on to state:

“To protect themselves against the risk of providing a TBL’s hedging function, banks need to hedge the risk themselves. The FCA said that ‘the bank will have entered into a separate IRHP’—interest rate hedging product—“with a third party in order to manage its financial risk of entering into the loan.”

The Bank’s CEO, Mr Thorburn, confirmed that this was the case for Clydesdale Bank.”

Clydesdale bank subsequently confirmed that there was actually no third party and that, in effect, all the loans were self-funded. Despite that, and despite it charging and receiving substantial break costs from customers, it refused to address the devastation it caused to businesses and lives across Scotland. It charged for long-term interest rate hedges that, it can be proved, it and its parent company never matched.

Ian Lightbody’s firm was informed in 2012 that to break its loan it would have to pay a 22% break cost on a loan of hundreds of thousands of pounds. It had cashed in personal pension funds and arranged alternative funding to secure the future of its companies and, in particular, of long-standing employees. Naturally, that became untenable, and it had to close several companies.

Another of my constituents, Craig Brock, had long-standing companies with loans amounting to substantial millions of pounds with Clydesdale bank. In 2012 it gave him just 30 days to refinance. It appointed BDO as administrators, and the companies were sold on to Paradigm Ltd, allegedly at arm’s length. It turned out, of course, that Paradigm was another Clydesdale-funded company. The FCA confirmed to the 2015 Treasury Committee inquiry that it wanted more power to investigate Clydesdale’s tailored business loans:

“The FCA has written twice to the Treasury to raise concerns about the sale of loans with embedded interest rate hedging features and the FCA’s inability to address the problem under the current perimeter of regulation. However, the Treasury appears not to have responded formally to the FCA on the matter.”

There can be no doubt that these products were, at best, mis-sold and, at worst, fraudulently pitched and designed to fall outside the FCA rules. The bank and these products should be investigated by the FCA without delay. Thousands of SMEs and businesspeople across the UK took these products with no proper explanation of either the conditions or costs associated. They deserve our support, and they deserve justice.

4.57 pm

Chris Elmore (Ogmore) (Lab): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Mr Robertson. I congratulate the hon. Member for Hazel Grove (Mr Wragg) on securing this debate. I have to say, however, that this is the fifth debate I have taken part in on this matter in my two and a half years in the House. It is disappointing that we are here again. We are not making the progress that we should be making and that our constituents deserve.

As we have heard, many colleagues have experience of many examples of serious malpractice within the banking sector. Indeed, from discussing my experiences of this issue with colleagues from across the House, it seems that the majority of cases remain unresolved. I wholeheartedly agree with my colleagues from the all-party parliamentary group that it is now time the Government provided adequate resources for these cases to be reviewed, to ensure that those who have been treated poorly receive the justice they deserve.

I would like to raise the case of my constituent Mr Alun Richards, which I have raised many times since I was first elected. This case has been going on so long that my predecessor, Huw Irranca-Davies, raised it...
nine or 10 years ago. Until around a decade ago, Alun Richards was one of Wales’s most successful businessmen. By the early noughties, Mr Richards’s farming and property enterprises had received award recognition and his efforts soon attracted—at the time, welcome—attention from Lloyds Banking Group. Lloyds offered Mr Richards a gold star account and an interest rate of 1% over base. After weighing this up against other offers, Mr Richards accepted the Lloyds offer, and his business continued to thrive.

The financial crash in 2008 was a global turning point. Mr Richards believes that his relationship with Lloyds acutely deteriorated at that point. Suddenly, with little notice, Alun’s bank managers in Carmarthen, Gwilym Francis and Ian Richards, transferred his accounts to a larger branch based in Bristol. After a short period, Alun approached his new branch and was alarmed to discover that his new bank manager, Max Meredith, was from the business support unit, which focuses on recoveries. Alun was deeply worried about this change as, prior to that, he had considered his business to be booming. Mr Meredith agreed with Alun that his circumstances were not typical for such a transfer and agreed to transfer his account back to Carmarthen. To Alun’s dismay, Gwilym Francis and Ian Richards refused to accept the account back in Carmarthen.

Alun soon received a visit from Mr John Holiday and Mr Jonathan Miles from the business support unit in Bristol. During this meeting, one of Alun’s accountants questioned Mr Miles’s behaviour and background. Mr Miles claimed that he worked for Lloyds Banking Group, and repeated that claim for the following two and a half years. Mr Richards has since discovered that Mr Miles was a chartered surveyor, a member of the Royal Institution of Chartered Surveyors and a partner of Alder King. It appears that no official secondment was in place. Mr Miles even appointed partners from Alder King—Julian Smith and Andrew Hughes—as the Law of Property Act 1925 receivers. When that initially surfaced, Mr Hughes temporarily resigned. RICS has refused to take any action and, following complaints against Bristol-based lawyers TLT, so have the Solicitors Regulation Authority and the Insolvency Practitioners Association.

Alun Richards’s decade-long struggle has involved Lloyds Banking Group, Alder King and the Royal Institution of Chartered Surveyors. Surely it cannot be right that Mr Richards, whose enterprise was worth about £5 million, has been left with nothing as the direct result of the actions of Lloyds bank and the others I have listed, as he believes.

Mr Richards and many others across the country feel that their cases have not been investigated properly, despite my appeals and those of other hon. Members from across the House to many different bodies. Most recently, we wrote to the Chair of the Treasury Committee, the right hon. Member for Loughborough (Nicky Morgan), asking her to open an inquiry into these alleged malpractices. Disappointingly, she was unable to give us that inquiry, but I sincerely call on the Minister to take action to ensure that these unresolved cases are comprehensively reviewed to ensure that those individuals who have been wronged receive the justice they deserve.

There is a real need to give the Serious Fraud Office extra funds to investigate the ever-increasing list of actions by Lloyds and those other organisations. The FCA’s line—that the alleged fraud does not reach the limits to investigate—simply will not wash any longer. There are too many cases involving large sums of money—millions and millions of pounds—for the FCA to simply say that the figure is not high enough to investigate.

Ten long years on from the crash, it can only be right that the Government provide adequate resources for these cases to be reviewed. It is their duty to investigate these malpractices to ensure that they never happen again and that constituents such as Mr Richards, and those of all hon. Members from across the House, get the justice that they rightly deserve.

5.1 pm

Kevin Hollinrake (Thirsk and Malton) (Con): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Mr Robertson. I, too, congratulate my hon. Friend the Member for Hazel Grove (Mr Wragg) on securing the debate. He is a great advocate on behalf of victims.

I will start with a few words in support of banks and bankers. I have been in business for 25 years, and I could not have achieved anywhere near as much as I achieved without the support of bankers, the vast majority of whom do a good job of supporting the UK economy by offering vital support to businesses. I am sure that most people in the banking world are as shocked as we are by some of the scandals of the last 10 years.

It is critical for us all to play on a level playing field—that is the free-market economy principle. We need to adhere to some basic rules, which must be the same whether someone is a businessperson or a banker. As my hon. Friend the Member for Hazel Grove said, the key principles that we must all adhere to are that justice is blind, no one is above the law, and justice must be done and be seen to be done. Where we are is a mile away from that, because there is so much evidence not just of malpractice and mistreatment, but of fraud throughout the banking sector, particularly in RBS and in Lloyds and HBOS.

For a while, the accusation was that the people who were bringing forward these claims, such as the Turners, were conspiracy theorists—they had failed businesses that could not survive anyway, so it was something that we did not need to look into properly. Then along came the section 166 report into RBS, which clearly identified that RBS had mistreated thousands of businesses. Of course, that report nearly never came out, but when it did it was a critical moment.

It is the same with Lloyds and HBOS: but for the persistence of one or two individuals, the case would never have come to trial and those people would never have been convicted. They are not isolated cases; there was widespread abuse.

Bob Stewart (Beckenham) (Con): I am quite concerned, because I have looked through the banking code of conduct and it seems to mention only banks. Is there any personal responsibility in it, so that the people who make the decisions can be brought to account for them?

Kevin Hollinrake: My hon. Friend makes a good point, which I will come to. Interestingly, our campaign, which is supported by so many of the hon. Members present, is also supported by some interesting people. Gordon Brown, the former Prime Minister, has said that he fears another crash because the bankers have no
fear of imprisonment—the personal accountability that my hon. Friend referred to. Andrew Bailey of the Financial Conduct Authority expressed real concern in a recent newspaper article that no one “has been banned as a consequence of the financial crisis.”

My hon. Friend is absolutely right, because the problem goes beyond mistreatment. We have seen evidence of forged signatures, manipulated valuations, manufactured covenant defaults, asset acquisition opportunities being sought out, and conflicts of interest almost everywhere we look. That includes the case of Julia Davey, who is present today.

Julia Davey is one of the most successful businesspeople in the UK, but Lloyds and KPMG forced her into the business support unit. David Crawshaw of KPMG was the independent reviewer of the business, the consultant advising the business and the administrator to the business. How can that be right? That multimillion-pound business was taken down by a £100,000 utility bill, when there were ample moneys in the bank. That money was used to pay the advisers, not the debt. It is outrageous.

The banks’ default position has been denial all the way. When Lawrence Tomlinson first established that there was abuse, they tried to withdraw the funding for his business to keep him quiet, which is a disgrace. Throughout the section 166 report, there is clear evidence of malpractice that goes beyond simple mistreatment and into fraud. The same is true for Lloyds and HBOS. The regulators’ attention was drawn to the fact that the abuse was going on thousands of times, but there has still been no action.

The FCA still says that the banks must be trusted to run their own internal redress schemes for the abuses. At Lloyds, the Griggs review is an internal scheme with no independent verification of the settlement that is made. At RBS, the situation with Sir William Blackburne’s review is similar. I do not dispute the fact that they are honourable people, but how can justice be seen to be done if these matters are decided internally? It cannot be right. What if those people, who are working internally for those banks, find evidence of fraud in their investigations? Would they put it in the shredder or would they hand it to the police? I will leave that for those in the Chamber to decide.

We need action. We need regional fraud squads and a twin-track approach, so that the Serious Fraud Office works with the Financial Conduct Authority, as happens in the US. There has to be criminal liability for the failure to prevent economic crime, as we have for the failure to prevent bribery and tax evasion. We need to introduce conduct of business rules to SME banking, so that regulators have a basis on which to judge a claim. We need our financial services tribunal and a public inquiry. There are 12 separate inquiries and counting into various parts of the banking system—a piecemeal approach to a systemic problem. We need cultural change. We need to restore faith in the system. Justice must be blind. No one is above the law. Justice must be done, and justice must be seen to be done.

5.8 pm

Jim Shannon (Strangford) (DUP): I, too, congratulate the hon. Member for Hazel Grove (Mr Wragg) on securing the debate. He is right that we have discussed the subject many times, as the hon. Member for Thirsk and Malton (Kevin Hollinrake) also mentioned. We look to the Minister, who understands the issues that we bring forward very well, for a substantial response. I am grateful to other right hon. and hon. Members for their contributions to the debate about the mis-selling of interest rate hedging products since 2001.

It is important to say, as the hon. Member for Thirsk and Malton did, that my relationship with the banks has been good. My mother and father’s relationship with the banks was also good, because in those days banks were easier to get on with. The borrowing of money was probably very simple. To be fair, the sums involved then were not the large sums that are involved today. Nevertheless, as elected representatives, issues and complaints come forward to us, and in the Gallery behind us there are many constituents who have been wronged, abused and disenfranchised by the banks, and we are here to put their cases forward.

Some of my constituents have been appallingly and despically treated. I will mention a couple of them, without giving too much detail, just to put their cases on the record. As Members will know, the Democratic Unionist party has consistently said that there is a role for a financial services tribunal and a competent ombudsman service for banking complaints, which would follow the parliamentary intent that such cases should be treated fairly and reasonably, and with timeliness.

In Northern Ireland, we use the terminology of “keeping people’s feet to the fire”; we do not want them to get burnt, but we want people to feel the heat of what we are saying in this Chamber. So I look to the Minister to ensure that the people involved feel the heat, and will thereby respond and look after the people in the Gallery today, as well as my constituents who have been disenfranchised despically.

The small and medium-sized enterprises are the ones feeling the pain. I will name two in particular in my constituency: the Armstrongs and the Semples. Their cases have been recorded in Hansard before and in the short time that I have today I could not do either of them justice, but Hansard will record the fact that I have put their cases in the main Chamber on two occasions in the past.

The Semples are large dairy farmers who had borrowed a lot of money. They were then squeezed to the point where they had to pay back almost a million pounds. The Armstrongs had made some land acquisitions, but the banks involved squeezed them. They offered them the money and then squeezed them to a considerable extent. The effect on these people’s health, their families and their relationships has been absolutely enormous—we cannot begin to understand that. Without mentioning the person specifically, one of the people I have referred to has serious health issues. Family relationships become strained or break down; they do at the best of times.

Very quickly, I just want to say that we believe that in the discussions about this issue a broad consensus has emerged, similar to that concerning the Financial Conduct Authority consultation.

I will refer to the issue of compensation, because it is very important that the Minister takes it on board. An upper level of £600,000 is appropriate where the complainant is still trading and has a choice of which route they wish to pursue. Latterly, a few people sought
the view of the DUP and that of a few other parties on the idea that there should be lower and upper limits of compensation. After much research and reflection, we now believe that Her Majesty’s Government should consider that claims of less than £25,000 should only be eligible for an ombudsman-type service and that the upper limit should be £600,000, which is the figure I mentioned earlier. For those affected businesses that are still trading, the lower limit for a financial services tribunal should be £25,000 and the upper limit should be £5 million. Those are the changes we ask the Minister for in respect of compensation.

For those businesses that are now insolvent as a result of alleged bank conduct and behaviour, the upper claim limit should be £10 million and of course such cases can only be dealt with by a financial services tribunal. In all cases where there are claims above that sum, it should be a matter for the commercial courts.

We have met the Minister who is here today, and tomorrow the hon. Member for Thirsk and Malton will meet the Chair of the Treasury Committee. I met a former Chair of the Treasury Committee some time back, and we have met the FOS and the Financial Ombudsman Service as well. We have done all the door-knocking that we can possibly do and what we need, with respect to all those people we have met, is not to hear words; we need to see action and that action has to come from the Minister who is here today.

Once again, I will just reiterate our view in the DUP that all legacy complaints should be the subject of a voluntary review in the first instance by the bank concerned, with priority given to those complaints that Members of Parliament have already brought to the attention of the House—every Member in this Chamber today has done just that—or to the attention of the FCA or the FOS, as set out in early-day motion 1162 in April 2017.

We need accountability in this process; we need those who have been guilty of criminal acts, as has been alleged, to feel the punishment for their wrongdoings; and I believe that the responsibility that I have as the Member of Parliament for Strangford is to speak up for the Armstrongs, the Semples and for many others in my constituency. There are at least half a dozen others who I cannot mention because they are embarrassed; they are in business and they do not want to have their names mentioned. People should be sure that when we mention names, it is like an iceberg, with nine tenths of the people affected not being mentioned, and they are not being mentioned because of the embarrassment. The enormity of this issue must not be underestimated. However, I have already spoken for too long, Mr Robertson.

5.14 pm

Stephen Kerr (Stirling) (Con): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Mr Robertson. I thank my hon. Friend the Member for Hazel Grove (Mr Wragg), who secured this debate, for an excellent and powerful speech.

I will refer straight away to the speech made by Andrew Bailey of the Financial Conduct Authority at its annual public meeting just a month ago, in which he said the following, which I find quite shocking:

“Given the serious concerns that were identified in the independent review it was only right that we launched a...investigation to see if there was any action that could be taken against senior management or RBS.”

He was talking about the Global Restructuring Group, or GRG. He went on to say:

“It is important to recognise that the business of GRG was largely unregulated” —what a telling statement—

“and the FCAs powers to take action in such circumstances...are very limited.”

Surely that is where we have gone wrong—commercial lending to businesses was “unregulated” to the extent that those businesses were vulnerable to the indiscriminate action of the banks. I will leave the rest of that statement unread.

I also thank my hon. Friend for his fitting use of the metaphor of Lady Justice to represent the dire situation that so many business owners face. Indeed, I suggest that Lady Justice is not only blind and has her arms tied firmly behind her back but is gagged and silenced. Onerous gagging clauses were incorporated into confidentiality agreements, with the effect of silencing witnesses and ensuring that justice is never done. The use of those gagging clauses ensures that organisations responsible for wrongdoing can not only conduct an operation of denial and obstruction of justice but use the clauses as a tool of abuse, to suppress any evidence of criminal behaviour. We are aware of several instances of gagging clauses that specifically state that an individual is unable to voluntarily approach the police or regulators with concerns about potential criminal activity. Let us be clear: that is unacceptable.

At this point we need to turn to the solicitors who are, quite frankly, aiding and abetting concealment of potential criminal activity by writing contracts that contain such onerous gagging clauses. In essence, they are bullying victims into silence and preventing them from discussing their case with those who are there to protect them: the police, Members of Parliament and regulators. That is a deeply troubling fact.

One pertinent example of such practice, cited on numerous occasions by the hon. Member for Cardiff Central (Jo Stevens), is a constituent of hers who accused Lloyds Banking Group plc and the Law of Property Act receives, Alder King LLP, of a fraud that robbed them of their business and their livelihood. Once the allegations were made by the individual to the bank, Lloyds Banking Group plc proposed to forgive the constituent’s indebtedness, which had ultimately been caused by the actions of the bank and Alder King LLP, in exchange for the signing of a confidentiality agreement that would have prevented any further discussion of the case. Thankfully, the constituent declined the offer, making it possible to discuss their case here today. It will be clear to everyone in attendance today that that tactic was used by the banks and their solicitors to hide abuse and allegedly criminal activity.

The Solicitors Regulation Authority, which is the regulatory body for solicitors in England and Wales, has a duty to society, and I encourage it to issue very firm guidance to prevent solicitors from contractually silencing allegations of criminal conduct.

Jo Stevens: I am grateful to the hon. Gentleman for giving way and for his reference to my constituent, Mr Shabir. In Mr Shabir’s case, not only was a gagging order presented to him, but he also has a legal opinion from Queen’s counsel saying that a criminal fraud has been committed against him. That is exactly the sort of circumstance that the hon. Gentleman is talking about.
Stephen Kerr: I thank the hon. Lady for her intervention. She made the point that I was just about to make, namely that it is not possible to contract out of criminal behaviour, and it may be that these gagging clauses are in fact unenforceable. However, that is not the point. Such clauses serve the purpose of instilling fear and effectively silence concerns, and potentially suppress valuable evidence. The all-party parliamentary group on fair business banking and finance has found dozens of cases like that one, and people are scared.

Time and time again in this House, we call for transparency and we hear a lot of lip service about the industry’s commitment to it, but there can be neither transparency nor fairness if people are being subjected to onerous confidentiality agreements that prevent the investigation of allegations of criminal activity and obstruct justice, stopping it being served.

This issue should be deeply troubling for all Members of the House. Greater scrutiny must be applied to the use gagging agreements and the role they play in the concealment of criminal activity.

5.19 pm

Mr Khalid Mahmood (Birmingham, Perry Barr) (Lab): It is always a pleasure to serve under your stewardship, Mr Robertson. I thank the hon. Member for Hazel Grove (Mr Wragg) for raising this issue, which is very important, particularly for our small and medium-sized enterprises, which work extremely hard to build their businesses, and which want to move forward and contribute to their local communities, employing people in the process.

One of my constituency cases is to do with HSBC. The director of a company that was not failing—it had a huge number of assets—was asked to sign over to a new loan agreement, but he was attending his dad’s funeral in India so the agreement was signed on his behalf by someone in the bank. Someone faked his signature on the document. On his return, he was told he had no choice but to proceed. The loan was offered to the company without its asking for it, to invest further in the capital assets into which it wanted to expand its business. It was forced into the position of having an additional loan and, because of the terms and conditions of that loan, the company was offered restructuring. So a company that was fluid in its assets and able to function normally was forced into restructuring. The personnel initially involved in the restructuring —those who were forcing the company into that corner—then turned into the recovery personnel, so there were people in the bank with the dual role of restructuring and recovery.

The company has fought the case for more than 10 years. It has fought extremely hard, despite the main director having lost his father and the huge stress caused throughout the family. There has been continuous suffering. The company was bound into a non-disclosure agreement and was stuck for many years. Through a lot of hard work and pain, with my office and one of my senior advisers dealing with the case, we have managed at least to get to the stage where the NDA has been removed.

Yet the company cannot get any recourse for the losses incurred, let alone the initial debt problems that the bank caused, which put the company in such a predicament. Those are the problems we have; that is what these banks do.

There are two of my constituents in that position with HSBC, and two in that position with Lloyds. Both banks operate in exactly the same way. Another constituent who is involved with Lloyds bank had the bank decide to call in the receivers on a Friday at 5 pm, so it was not possible to have recourse through lawyers or anyone else to stop the injunction. That was someone rich in assets being closed down and locked into this process. The modus operandi of these banks is clear. All four of my constituents who have been dealt with in this way were fluid in their asset base—they were not struggling for money—yet, at the moment, one of them is unable to go to another high street bank because of what the people in HSBC have put them through. That is where the real issues are.

I have another constituent, Mr Elliott, who is here today. He has a significant number of companies that are doing well. He fought his case and managed to get to the court stage. Two weeks before the trial, he got an order from Lloyds saying that it would sue him for £1 million a day for every day the trial took place. Having taken that huge step, it was fundamentally difficult to tolerate that sort of pressure.

The individuals involved must be held criminally responsible for their actions. It is high time that the Government took charge and that all such businesses, which bring huge benefits to our local communities, were protected from the sharks and the way in which they operate.

5.25 pm

Andrew Jones (Harrogate and Knaresborough) (Con): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Mr Robertson. I congratulate my hon. Friend the Member for Hazel Grove (Mr Wragg) on securing the debate and commend him for his tenacity in maintaining the focus on this issue.

I want to raise the issue of the resources and expertise of those investigating the usually very complex cases of business banking fraud. We are seeing a huge increase in financial crime in our country. Some of it is well known—most of us will have residents who have been scammed out of money by transferring huge sums. That straightforward fraud is hard enough to pursue, but much harder again is complex business fraud.

One such case that has been raised with me has been discussed in this place twice before, in 2013 and 2015: that of the successful, growing and profitable business, Premier Motor Auctions. The detail of the case and the role of the various players was highlighted by the former Member of Parliament for Great Grimsby, Austin Mitchell, and can be read in Hansard. He did an excellent job highlighting the extreme closeness of the working relationship between Lloyds bank and PricewaterhouseCoopers. I do not intend to go over the details of the case in the time allowed; I simply refer Members to that debate, which was clearly feisty and shows just how long Members have been concerned about banking practice.

I have now taken up the case, and my hon. Friend the Member for Thirsk and Malton (Kevin Hollinrake) and I wrote to West Yorkshire police asking it to commence a criminal investigation. It has decided not to do so, citing the scale of the resources required and the fact that the victim pursued civil recourse—though in fact that was a case taken by the liquidator, which was
dropped under extreme pressure from Lloyds bank and PWC. I understand that that pressure was the threat of being sued for £1 million a day—real David and Goliath territory, though, with a less satisfactory outcome. The other point the police made was that the case would be more suitably investigated by another body. I am a strong supporter of our police services and I can see their point of view—resources are under pressure. The case referred to here today, which has been investigated by Thames Valley police, took 150 dedicated officers and cost £7 million.

West Yorkshire police has a point when it says that other bodies could be better placed to carry out the investigations, which leads to the underlying question I would like to ask the Minister: do we, in the UK, have the right people investigating the right cases, and are they working as closely as they could be with regulators? That is the two-track approach that my hon. Friend the Member for Thirsk and Malton highlighted. Do our regulators have enough teeth and are they using them? Who is looking at the relationship between banks and accountants? Are local police services the right bodies to be tackling complex corporate cases? Such cases are difficult and require specialist knowledge. If the decision is taken that the local police service is the right body, can more specialised resource or extra funding be provided to help it undertake the work?

It is not at all clear to me that we have this right. I think we need to reconsider it. I can see the challenges the police service faces, but I also see cases, such as that of Premier Motor Auctions, where questions need clear answers and victims need and deserve those answers. It is the underlying national issue, brought into perspective by the local cases, that needs consideration, and I ask the Minister to consider that as he reviews whether our financial system serves our country as well as it could.

Kevin Hollinrake: My hon. Friend is making an excellent speech. He said earlier in his remarks that Mr D’Eye was not behind on his payments when the bank first took action. My hon. Friend may be aware that Australia has brought forward a royal commission because of similar abuses there, and one of the changes that has come out of that process is that a bank cannot take action against a business if that business is not behind on its payments. Does that not underline the need for a full public inquiry?

Bob Stewart: I thank my hon. Friend for that very good point. Of course it does. We need to get on and sort this matter out.

In the 18th century, highwaymen used to stop coaches, get people outside them and say, “Stand and deliver. Your money or your life.” Those guys had a choice. Now, the 21st century equivalent of highwaymen—some in the banks—shout, “Your money or your lifestyles”, and they take both. Thank you, Mr Robertson.

Mr Laurence Robertson (in the Chair): I am grateful to hon. Members for their self-restraint and to Opposition Front Benchers for offering to make slightly shorter speeches.

Kirsty Blackman (Aberdeen North) (SNP): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Mr Robertson. I thank the hon. Member for Hazel Grove (Mr Wragg) for being here. I am not going to say it is a pleasure to take part in this debate, because I do not think we should still be having these debates. The hon. Member for Beckenham (Bob Stewart) is absolutely correct: this subject has been discussed in the House so often, because so many of us have been approached by constituents, that we should not still be at this stage.
A number of hon. Members have raised issues that their constituents have brought to them and that, to me, scream of illegality. People have had things signed against their will, bank accounts opened in their name, or money taken from their bank accounts. Companies have been gone after because they are asset-rich; in Scotland, that particularly affected agricultural businesses, for example, because they had large assets that the bank could chase after. It baffles me that there have not been convictions in relation to those things, because I do not understand how they are not illegal.

Given the number of Members who have come forward about this matter, not all of our constituents can possibly be coming to us with falsehoods. So many people have been affected by this that it absolutely must be true. That was one of the most difficult things for individuals to come to terms with: I heard people talking about the fact that they were going through a total nightmare, and they did not understand how this could possibly be happening to them. In fact, they believed it could not be happening to them and that something must have gone horribly wrong. That has not helped to make sure that many people can come forward.

I will raise a few issues that the Scottish National party is asking to be addressed. I will focus a little on GRG, because that is the organisation that the majority of Scottish constituents have been hit by, but we have also had constituents hit by HSBC, Lloyds and Clydesdale. We believe that the UK Government need to pick up where the FCA has failed in relation to the comprehensive review of banking culture. The FCA produced a discussion document, but that is not enough. If the FCA cannot do these things comprehensively, the UK Government can step in, take action and make sure that positive changes are made to banking culture, because it is not the case that banks are now perfect.

The SNP will continue to call for the UK Government to create a permanent commercial financial dispute resolution platform to alleviate the suffering of victims of mis-selling. Given the issues that have been raised today, we will continue to say that asking victims of mis-selling to take the banks to court is totally inappropriate, and financially unworkable in the vast majority of cases. If the Government could step in and create that commercial financial dispute resolution platform, individuals would welcome that.

The UK Government have had a significant stake in RBS, and could have done more to highlight the issues there have been in that organisation and to ensure that RBS has told the truth. The internal resolution mechanisms that RBS has put in place could have been stronger and easier for individuals to navigate—particularly given the consequential loss issues involved, it has been very hard for constituents to access justice.

As the hon. Member for Thirsk and Malton (Kevin Hollinrake) said, it is vital that banks lend to small businesses, both for our economy and for those small businesses. These issues have had an economic impact on growth, because businesses have not been able to grow and be successful. There has been a huge impact on individuals’ lives. There have been marriage breakdowns and there have been suicides. I have spoken previously about my cousin and her family. She, her husband and their four children were made homeless as a result of what RBS GRG did to them, because they had an agricultural farm, and that farm was an asset that could be taken from them. A constituent also came to me who had suffered huge personal tragedy, as well as financial tragedy, as a result of what happened specifically with RBS GRG.

I have already said that people do not come forward. That is because of the confidentiality clauses that they have had to sign, because they are embarrassed, as has been mentioned, or because they are suffering from financial ruin and have enough to worry about without trying to take on a massive financial institution as an individual. More could be done so that those individuals get justice.

To conclude, we should have a comprehensive review of banking culture and a permanent commercial financial dispute resolution platform. The Government need to take action now so that this can never happen again.

Jonathan Reynolds (Stalybridge and Hyde) (Lab/Co-op): I, too, thank the hon. Member for Hazel Grove (Mr Wragg) for securing today’s debate. Colleagues will know that he and I are constituency neighbours. The powerful case study that he gave on behalf of his constituent could quite easily have been on behalf of one of mine. I first became aware of the scale of the issues through constituency examples. Every Member who has spoken in today’s debate has presented those testimonies extremely well. I also thank the all-party parliamentary group on fair business banking and finance, especially for the efforts of its chair, the hon. Member for Thirsk and Malton (Kevin Hollinrake), who gave an authoritative and powerful account of some of the problems that have come to the group’s attention.

Many of us have participated in similar debates before, but as we mark the 10th anniversary of the financial crisis it is a good time to consider the relationship between businesses and their banks. All of us in the Chamber, even though we have come today with powerful case studies of inappropriate behaviour, want to see a strong relationship between businesses and banks. Having a good relationship between banks and businesses is critical to our economic growth, prosperity, employment and much more.

Unfortunately, research shows that frighteningly low numbers of small businesses trust their bank to do the right thing for them. That is unsurprising given some of what we have heard today. We have to improve that. We have to look at why that is, and how we can change it. We have to restore confidence that the regulatory system is fair, and crucially that there will be a level playing field for businesses when they find themselves in conflict with their bank, especially if their bank is suspected of having committed fraud, as we are discussing today.

The central premise of today’s debate and of all the speeches has been that there are insufficient resources available to tackle business banking fraud. Colleagues will be aware that I agree with that premise. The National Crime Agency, the Serious Fraud Office, local police forces and the Financial Conduct Authority do not have sufficient capacity, either individually or collectively, to look into these matters with the attention that it deserves. I am sure that the Minister will refer to the new National Economic Crime Centre—the NECC—a new unit of the National Crime Agency. An initial budget of £6 million
does not seem sufficient when compared with, as I think the hon. Member for Harrogate and Knaresborough (Andrew Jones) mentioned, the £7 million cost of the Thames Valley police investigation into HBOS in Reading, and given the scale of the issues raised today.

I want to say quite a bit more, because I do not think that we can simply say, "This issue requires more resources and that will solve the problem." It is about how we can change the culture that has led to such outrages happening time and again. I will talk about three different ways in which I believe we could contribute to achieving that. First, we could launch a full public inquiry into recent business banking scandals. Secondly, we could introduce an independent tribunal system for small and medium-sized enterprises to resolve disputes. Lastly, we could put in place a more robust system to better protect and enable whistleblowing.

The first step has to be securing proper redress for SMEs that have been mistreated by their banks. Scandals such as GRG and HBOS mis-selling have been outrages, and have seriously dented business and customer confidence. The shadow Treasury team has consistently called for a judge-led independent inquiry into RBS GRG and other small business banking scandals, so that victims can get proper redress. I know that several colleagues in the Chamber have argued strongly for the same measure. There is clearly cross-party support for that to take place.

Such an inquiry would not just get to the bottom of the case studies that have been raised today; it would establish whether there is further criminal liability to be addressed, and examine the wider systemic issues that have allowed such events to take place. We are talking about people's livelihoods, homes and relationships. Some people have simply been ruined. These issues are too important for us to sweep under the carpet, with the risk that such events could happen again. We have to be able to go out from a debate such as today's and promise constituents that this will not happen again. In my view, a full public inquiry is required to do that.

Secondly, in terms of disputes, part of the problem is that it is well recognised that the gap between the financial ombudsman for individuals and the full legal process for very big firms is just too great. I support the all-party parliamentary group's proposal to establish an independent tribunal to help create a level playing field between businesses and the banks in order to fill that gap.

We all await with interest the outcome of the UK Finance independent review, chaired by Mr Simon Walker, into complaints handling and alternative dispute resolution for SMEs. I have met Mr Walker and I understand that he will report very soon. The review will examine dispute resolution processes in different sectors and countries, and provide some evidence-based conclusions on how we can meet the needs of businesses for larger or more complex disputes.

Other initiatives are under way that will hopefully progress the situation. In July 2017, 20 banks signed up to the new standards of lending practice for business customers, which outlined what businesses should expect from their bank when in financial difficulty. Although such moves are welcome, my view is that ultimately we cannot rely on the industry to self-regulate. Look at the RBS GRG complaints resolution process as evidence. Concerns are being raised about how the goalposts have been moved regarding compensation, and how the process has been subject to quite a lot of individual discretion. That is why an independent tribunal system is necessary.

Lastly, an answer could lie in exploring a change in our approach to whistleblowing in financial services. Whistleblowing will never be a substitute for effective action by regulators, but it can play a part. That is especially important in a time of scarcer resources as a result of public spending cuts. The Dodd-Frank Act in the US, which was introduced as a central piece of post-financial crisis legislation in 2010, is a demonstration of how much more robust the whistleblower protection framework could be. Whistleblowers in the US are entitled to awards where their information leads to enforcement action. The framework is structured in such a way as to disincentivise false reports, but to provide protection in the event of dismissal.

The UK legislation, on the other hand, is much weaker. Although the Financial Conduct Authority can assist whistleblowers under the Public Interest Disclosure Act 1998, it has not been enshrined in regulation in the way the Dodd-Frank Act has been used in the US. There is a case for examining how we could introduce specific financial services whistleblower protection in order to seriously improve conduct in banking. I have encountered significant support for that within the sector itself. I think the hon. Member for Thirsk and Malton mentioned that many good people are working in the sector who want to see such issues improved so that today's debate does not have to happen again.

Having a banking system that we can trust is essential to our economy. Entrepreneurs who have taken the risk of setting up their own businesses deserve to know that there will be proper redress if they have been the victim of unscrupulous practices. SMEs are the backbone of the British economy. If they cannot trust the financial institutions that are meant to serve them, we will all pay a price.

If we are to begin to restore trust to UK business banking, there are two outcomes we have to achieve. The first is to ensure that the victims of the GRG and HBOS banking scandals get proper redress for the damage done to their businesses and livelihoods, and individuals, as well as the institutions they worked for, must face sanctions for their actions. The second outcome is that we must create a framework in which such a flagrant abuse of the bank and business relationship can never happen again.

With the combination of a full public inquiry, the establishment of an alternative dispute resolution mechanism and a radical rethink of how we treat whistleblowers, we could begin that process. These businesspeople, many of whom are in Parliament today, were badly let down. We must all commit to less talk and more action to get them the redress that they deserve.

Mr Laurence Robertson (in the Chair): I would like Mr Wragg to be left a minute to wind up at the end. I call the Minister.

5.48 pm

The Economic Secretary to the Treasury (John Glen): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Mr Robertson. This has been the fourth such debate
Mr Khalid Mahmood: The point is not whether the funds can be squeezed out of current budgets—police budgets are under huge stress at the moment. This is not a one-off; it is a long-standing issue about criminal activity by the banks, and resources need to be available to deal specifically with it.

John Glen: I am grateful for the hon. Gentleman’s intervention, and I listened to his earlier remarks. I think that this is about co-ordination and the appropriate configuration of resources.

Kevin Hollinrake: The Minister rightly mentions resources, which are always tight, but does he see a potential opportunity here? HBOS has not yet been fined for its scandalous abuses of 2007 and 2008, which tore apart many businesses. Would it be appropriate to use that fine to pump-prime a crime agency to deal with these issues? That agency could then be self-funding, because it would constantly be levying fines for abuses.

John Glen: We clearly need to find an effective mechanism to deal appropriately with the scale of the unaddressed challenges, and I will look at all options for that.

The City of London police have secured funding from the Home Office police reform and transformation fund to provide training for 600 investigators across police forces. There is also now a national register of fraud specialists; I acknowledge that the sentiment in this Chamber is that that is insufficient, but I should point out that it exists.

The regulatory framework has changed considerably since the events of the crash 10 years ago. I will not go through the whole history, but we have now established a network of robust and specialised financial regulatory bodies, each with a clear mandate and a set of responsibilities. However, I understand the concern about the reach of those bodies to deal with outstanding historical matters that our constituents are still raising with us. As part of that network, the Financial Conduct Authority is focused on ensuring that the conduct of firms and the interests of consumers are placed at the heart of the regulatory system and given the priority they deserve. That statutory objective will continue to guide the FCA’s work as it ensures that the highest possible standards are applied to the sector.

On SME lending, I am acutely aware that concerns remain about past cases of misconduct, the effects of which are still being felt today. There has been a great deal of justified anger within Parliament and beyond about cases such as those of the RBS Global Restructuring Group, HBOS Reading and the mis-selling of interest rate hedging products. I have been clear that the inappropriate treatment of SMEs by RBS GRG was unacceptable; I have made that point personally to the chief executive of RBS. The issues surrounding RBS GRG are firmly on my radar in the Treasury and I continue to work on the matter. The case of HBOS involved criminal activity, and it was right that those responsible were brought to justice. RBS and Lloyds, which now owns HBOS, have rightly set up compensation schemes for businesses affected by GRG and HBOS Reading.

My hon. Friend the Member for Stirling (Stephen Kerr) and other Members raised gagging clauses and the need for transparency. I am very sensitive to the pattern of settlements being offered that are effectively gagging clauses, such as in the case of Mr Shabir that
the hon. Member for Cardiff Central (Jo Stevens) raised. That does not seem an honourable way of dealing with legitimate complaints, so I will examine the matter carefully before I report back.

I am glad that to say that in response to direct loss claims relating to the GRG scheme, 978 outcome letters have been sent to customers and £15 million has so far been paid out in redress, on top of £115 million in complex fees. Offers have also been made to more than 90% of customers within the scope of the HBOS Reading review, and more than 85% of customers have accepted.

I am acutely conscious of time, but I think that it is important that I give a succinct update of what I will be doing over the next few weeks. I firmly believe that by increasing the emphasis on individual accountability, the senior managers and certification regime will prove hugely important in improving conduct standards in the financial services sector and allowing regulators to deal effectively with cases such as that of RBS GRG. The regime will be extended to the insurance sector in December and solo-regulated businesses will come in next year.

I look forward to Simon Walker’s review because it will allow me to reach a conclusion about what needs to happen. The Government have done a lot of work, but I accept that more is required. I have spoken to Andrew Bailey, to the retired High Court judge Sir William Blackburne, to Ross McEwan, to the chief executive of the Financial Ombudsman Service and to UK Finance, and I have met members of the all-party group. I am keen to give my hon. Friend the Minister for Hazel Grove the opportunity to reply, but let me confirm that there will be action and that I will come back in a matter of weeks.

5.59 pm

Mr Wragg: Thank you for chairing the debate, Mr Robertson. [ Interruption. ] I can hear the crowds outside protesting at the thought that I will be back in six months’ time to make the same speech—I hope that I will not be.

I thank the many members of the public who are watching from the Gallery. They are the people we are fighting for across the country, so it was good to hear contributions from all four nations of the United Kingdom today.

My hon. Friend the Minister said that action would come “imminently”, at least from the Treasury—a drastic improvement on the “very soon” that he promised before. That action cannot come soon enough.

Question put and agreed to.

Resolved.

That this House has considered the investigation of business banking fraud.

Cost of School Uniforms

[SIOBHAIN McDONAGH IN THE CHAIR]

6.1 pm

Frank Field (Birkenhead) (Ind): I beg to move, That this House has considered the cost of school uniforms.

Ms McDonagh, this is the first time I have spoken under your chairmanship, so not only is today’s debate really important, but it gives me real pleasure to serve under you. I am sure that view is going to be shared by everybody, including the Minister, for whom I have some really good news. I am hoping to enlist him in a twofold campaign. One part of it is that all of us who want to intervene should approach the Chancellor and ask him to lift VAT on school clothing—full stop. We should also ask him to give a direction to school governors in a way I think is going to emerge during the debate, and I will touch on that as well.

We are facing an open goal, because the year that the Minister came into the House of Commons, the hon. Member for East Worthing and Shoreham (Tim Loughton) introduced a Bill saying how absurd it was that there was a 14-year cut-off—point some of us may come back to. He pointed out that, for an average-sized 14-year-old, it means that VAT is applied where their collar size is over 14½ inches and where they wear jumpers with a 34-inch chest and upwards, trousers with waists of 28 inches and upwards or skirts with a 26-inch waist and upwards.

The key person supporting my hon. Friend—I will call him my hon. Friend because I agree very much with his views—was the Prime Minister. She was not then the Prime Minister; she was a Back Bencher. This was a topic dear to her heart, so I hope, when all of us together make an approach to the Prime Minister, and through her to the Chancellor, that we are going to get a massive amount of support for my hon. Friend and a constructive response.

I am hoping for a twofold response. The first part is that we scrap VAT on school clothing. If people can provide evidence that it is for a child at school, that will exempt the actual product, just as people with disability get some VAT exemptions when they can prove the status of their disability. Secondly, we want the Minister of State who drives schools policy to give a commitment that he will write to school heads and governors and ask them to do several things. First, school governors should undertake a pricing each year in local stores or wherever they request parents to shop on the cost of the school uniform. Secondly, there should be standard items from many suppliers rather than just one or, if lucky, two. Thirdly, if the school wants to distinguish itself from others, it should do it by standard colours that can be bought in many shops, not by specific blazers that are only to be bought in certain places.

I think other Members may want to come in on the actual costs of games kits, and I will quickly touch on all those issues. However, I also want to thank people from Birkenhead and beyond, because we had the most extraordinary response from there and from around the country about today—I did not know people wanted to follow a Facebook link to Birkenhead—and those people wrote in with their comments about the horrors.
Gloria De Piero (Ashfield) (Lab): I know how well this debate will be received in my constituency, where one parent contacted me to tell me about the extortionate £135 cost of their children’s school uniforms. The fact is that parents should be allowed to go to the high street, the supermarket or anywhere to get a school uniform. That is what happened under the last Labour Government—it was stated in the guidance, and it should be reintroduced.

Frank Field: That is a suggestion for the Minister. It could be guidance; I would love it to made be stronger than guidance—that schools must do this. I will come back to that.

Sarah Jones (Croydon Central) (Lab): I congratulate my right hon. Friend on securing this debate. I raised this issue when I was first elected last year, because a constituent had similarly come to me with the cost of uniforms. I was surprised that the Government committed to legislate to ensure schools did the right thing back in 2015. I received a letter from the Minister last month saying they are not going to do this until the next Session, which means at least five years since the first commitment was made. Does my right hon. Friend agree, that given the increasing costs of living that parents have to bear, a five-year delay to do something that the Government committed to do back in 2015 would be a pretty poor show?

Frank Field: It is a very poor show. There is a myth going around that we have no time to legislate because of Brexit. Ms McDonagh, I am sure you would think that the rubbish we debate in the Chamber would not be suitable for Westminster Hall and would just be filling up time. The Prime Minister believes we are all very busy with important legislation; we are simply not. I am really grateful to my hon. Friend. Why can the Cabinet Legislative Committee not give us time to introduce a Bill?

Rachael Maskell (York Central) (Lab/Co-op): I am really grateful to my right hon. Friend for securing the debate. Millthorpe School introduced a new school uniform this summer and it has meant that children have been excluded from class. When the Minister is writing to heads, perhaps saying that no child should be excluded—this is doubly stigmatising a child because they are poor and because they cannot afford the right uniform—will he also instruct all schools that they must recycle uniforms, not just on cost grounds but on environmental grounds, to ensure that a school uniform is affordable for absolutely everyone?

Frank Field: It is very good giving way, because these are points that I would have made otherwise. I merely underscore the point my hon. Friend. Friend has just made about how it may not be a one-off set of costs but an increasing set of costs through the year. Of course, if someone has young lads, who are all too often separated from their uniform and their games kit, the costs mount tremendously.

In preparing for this debate, we had a Feeding Birkenhead meeting a couple of weeks ago, and we talked about this debate. There were 22 mothers in the room who support Feeding Birkenhead. Practically all of them were either grandparents or parents. They all said, “We can actually give you examples,” and all of them have given me examples. There have been examples on Facebook—the House of Commons Facebook for these matters has got a huge number of responses from parents. I said that, during this debate, I would do what Ernest Bevin did when he appeared before the wages committee for dockers, where he laid out how much food the dockers would get from their wages and asked the independent panel if it thought that was adequate. One mother listed the cost of the uniform—I will hold the document up so the camera can see it. I will give it to the Minister afterwards—I do not expect him to read it now, but I jolly well hope it is going into the camera.

Stephanie Peacock (Barnsley East) (Lab): I am very grateful to my right hon. Friend for giving way, and I congratulate him on securing this important debate. I, too, have had a number of examples from across my constituency. A school uniform often costs in excess of £120 in Barnsley East. Does he agree—I know he does—that that is totally unacceptable? We need to look at ways to bring down the costs. Perhaps one way to do so is for governing bodies and local authorities to use their power to bulk buy.

Frank Field: All these ideas are here for the Minister to pick up and run with, particularly given that he has the Prime Minister’s support on this issue.

Some of the parents who wrote to me from Birkenhead and beyond have bills that are £300-plus for a school uniform, and they also face the devastating cost of games kits. I hold up another document from a mother, listing a games kit. When my hon. Friend the Member for York Central (Rachael Maskell) saw it, she jumped and said, “Look at that—emblems are being put on the items, which adds enormously to the cost.” That parent—a young woman—has a child in school who has to have two different games kit cases to bring the stuff to school.

Rachael Maskell: I was absolutely horrified about that. I met the staff of one school and asked why they put labels on trousers and skirts. They said that, previously, they tested girls’ trousers by pulling them away from the leg. Clearly, that is completely inappropriate. We need to set guidance to ensure that uniforms can be bought from standard retailers, so that badges are not put on trousers, skirts and other bits of kit.

Frank Field: Again, I see the Minister busily rewriting his speech—[Laughter.] We are laughing, but I know that nobody outside will mistake that: our comments are dead serious. I have heard horror stories about parents going without food to provide uniforms. They do not want their children to look different from other children, and they wake up at night worrying about it. This is an incredibly serious debate, but we are making some of our points as humorously as possible because we know we have got the Minister on our side.

Louise Haigh (Sheffield, Heeley) (Lab): My right hon. Friend is being very generous in giving way, and I congratulate him on securing this really important debate. The points he has been making are really serious. Buying school uniforms potentially plunges parents into poverty, and it also forces them to pick certain schools over others because of the expense of the uniforms. The previous Labour Government introduced a statutory school admissions code that explicitly required schools
to prevent the cost of school uniforms from getting in the way of admission. Perhaps the Minister will consider reintroducing it.

**Frank Field**: It is really great that all my best points are being taken. The Government say they are concerned about social mobility, but school uniform costs affect parents’ choices about which school they send their children to, irrespective of where they come not in the 11-plus selection but in the selection of schools. I thank my hon. Friend for that immensely important point.

**Chris Elmore (Ogmore) (Lab)**: I am a Welsh MP, and these issues are devolved to the Welsh Government. There is a different way of doing it. I urge my hon. Friend the shadow Minister and the Minister to look at what the Welsh Government are doing on school uniform grants. In Wales, a £1.7 million fund is available for children on free school meals. Parents can apply for a £125 grant, which can be spent not just on school uniforms but on sports kits, school trips and technologies. There are better ways of delivering, particularly for the least well-off children. If they are on free school meals, their parents can apply for that grant, which is worth up to £125. It is for reception children and children aged 11 who are going into year 7, so it is across the age range. I am sure my right hon. Friend would agree that there are better and different ways of supporting the least well off.

**Frank Field**: That is a particularly good one, isn’t it, Minister? The Prime Minister has told us that austerity is coming to an end, so she will want ideas about how to bring it to an end. Copying a proven model—we are not making up something that may not work—seems an admirable way to advance.

I am going to conclude, because the spokesman on our side—if I can still refer to him like that—has quite a bit to say, and we all wish to quiz the Minister. We have heard about the huge cost and about how arbitrary the 14-year cut-off point is. Will the Minister tell us when it was last reviewed? One person wrote on Facebook:

“*Our son is 14, going into year 10, 6ft 4, size 12 feet, 48 inch chest!*”

He has to have men’s shirts with very long arms so he can feel part of his school. It is very important that we get promises about improving the situation, not just for some but for all. There is a really important issue behind many of our contributions: we should be able to buy uniforms in many shops. For the many, not the few shops—that is what the policy should be.

The Minister should think about how he will lead us in approaching the Prime Minister. I say that in all seriousness, because we actually want to help him with this deadly serious topic. We want to help him with the instructions he will give to schools about, for example, costing their uniforms every year, getting supplies from standard suppliers, and the absurdity of the price for a games kit. If people want a uniform to be distinct, they should pick a colour that is commonly available and different from other school uniforms, rather than one that is available only from a single supplier.

I am really grateful to the Members who have turned up to the debate. We have been surprised by the number of letters, emails and phone calls that we have received. We have clearly just been through a horrendous period for parents, and I hope that they will not have to face that for another year.

The Minister for School Standards (Nick Gibb) rose—

**Siobhain McDonagh (in the Chair)**: Order. I was going to call the shadow Minister, but I have been corrected by the Clerk. The Opposition spokesperson cannot make a speech in a half-hour debate.

**Frank Field**: What I might do, if you are tolerant, Ms McDonagh, is take a few interventions from the shadow Minister so he can make a few points.

**Mike Kane (Wythenshawe and Sale East) (Lab)**: Will my right hon. Friend give way?

**Frank Field**: What a surprise!

**Mike Kane**: I thank my right hon. Friend for giving way. I attended his constituency fundraiser in 2010, and I am reminded of the event because—

**Siobhain McDonagh (in the Chair)**: Order. This is my error, and I apologise, but I understand that you cannot make a speech.

**Frank Field**: Can I just rewind? I had spoken with the Opposition spokesman, and we were under the impression that he could speak. I would have allowed him to intervene before I sat down. Could I say that I had not sat down, Ms McDonagh?

**Siobhain McDonagh (in the Chair)**: I would like to do anything I can to facilitate the right hon. Gentleman, but the guidance I have been handed states that during a half-hour debate, neither speeches nor interventions from Opposition Front Benchers are permitted, as is the rule in the House. I apologise.

**Mike Kane**: Can I speak from the Back Benches?

**Frank Field**: I hope my hon. Friend will be able to intervene in the debate from the Back Benches.

6.19 pm

**Mike Kane** (Wythenshawe and Sale East) (Lab): I am grateful to my right hon. Friend for my quick shuffle to the Back Benches. The previous occupant of the shadow Minister’s seat was my hon. Friend the Member for Stalybridge and Hyde (Jonathan Reynolds). I remember attending his constituency event in 2010 at St Anselm’s, with the former Member for Stalybridge and Hyde, who was the guest speaker. I point out to my right hon. Friend the Member for Birkenhead (Frank Field), in his current state of exile, that St Anselm’s was exiled twice by William II and Henry I, so I suspect that whatever happens in his political career in the weeks, months and years ahead, he will be a champion for people in poverty.

The debate is really about eight years of austerity and Government policy. Universal credit is failing and driving people into debt, hunger and even destitution. Over 4 million children are growing up in poverty and a million people are forced to go to food banks. The Government should be hanging their heads in shame that families cannot afford to buy school uniforms for their children. A number of hon. Members have pointed out that we have a system in which children are sent home from school because their parents cannot afford to meet the dress codes.

I think my right hon. Friend the Member for Birkenhead will agree that we need to know what the Minister is doing to ensure that children do not lose time in school
because their parents cannot afford to meet unrealistic school uniform demands. When will the Minister ensure that the Government pledge to make school uniform guidance legally binding, and what are the Minister and the Government doing to address the ever-increasing challenge faced by parents to pay for the basics to enable their children to attend and participate in school? As my right hon. Friend rightly said, people are putting off buying food because they have to buy uniforms.

Finally, will the Minister pledge to end, once and for all, the perverse situation in which poverty acts as a barrier to children attending school because of uniforms?

6.21 pm

The Minister for School Standards (Nick Gibb): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Ms McDonagh, and to hear the hon. Member for Wythenshawe and Sale East (Mike Kane) speaking from the Back Benches, which is where all the best people in the Labour party sit. It is also a real pleasure to hear the right hon. Member for Birkenhead (Frank Field) lead this important debate on the cost of school uniforms. I pay tribute to him for his work with the all-party parliamentary group on hunger, and for his local work with Feeding Birkenhead, which has benefited thousands of children with meals and activities during the school holidays, as well as school breakfasts during term time.

The Department strongly encourages schools to have a uniform as it can play an important role in contributing to the ethos of a school and setting an appropriate tone. It is common for a school to have a dress code, and the overwhelming majority of schools require pupils to wear a uniform. For pupils, uniforms can remove competition to keep up with the latest fashion trends. For teachers, uniform can support discipline and motivation among pupils as part of a wider behaviour policy. For parents, uniform means they do not need to worry about what their children are wearing or the costs associated with buying the latest fashions or brands. A school uniform can also help foster equality among pupils and support the development of a whole school ethos.

One of the primary purposes of a uniform is to remove differences between pupils. With a standard uniform in place, it is harder to discern a pupil’s background; instead, what is important is their character and personality. In these ways, uniforms can play an important part in helping pupils feel safe at school. While decisions about school uniform are made by headteachers and governors—it is right that they continue to make these decisions—we always encourage schools to have uniform policies for those reasons.

In 2015, the Department commissioned a survey on the cost of school uniform, which provides the most recent information the Department holds on the matter. It indicated that the average cost of most items, except the school bag, decreased between 2007 and 2015, once adjusted for inflation. Moreover, most parents were pleased with the overall cost and quality of their child’s uniform. Over two-thirds of parents were happy with the cost of uniform and PE kit.

As was expressed in the debate, it is important that we are not complacent. While school uniform can have a hugely positive impact on a school in terms of providing cohesion and community, it may present—as we have heard—a financial burden on some, particularly lower-income families. In the same survey on the cost of school uniform, nearly one-fifth of parents reported that they had suffered financial hardship as a result of purchasing their child’s school uniform. The cost of uniform should not act as a barrier to obtaining a good school place. We want all children to be able to attend a school of their parents’ choice wherever possible.

Sarah Jones: Will the Minister give way?

Nick Gibb: I will not because of the time; I am sorry.

No school uniform should be so expensive as to leave pupils or their families feeling unable to apply to or attend a school. One hon. Member raised the issue of the admissions code, which explicitly sets out that, “Admission authorities must ensure that…policies around school uniform or school trips do not discourage parents from applying for a place for their child.”

It is for the governing body of a school to decide whether there should be a school uniform policy, and if so, what it should be. It is also for the governing body to decide how the uniform should be sourced. However, governing bodies should give cost considerations the highest priority when making decisions about their school’s uniform.

The Department publishes best practice guidance on school uniform, the latest version of which was published in September 2013. That guidance makes it clear that when schools set their policy on school uniform, they should “consider the cost, the available supply sources and year round availability of the proposed uniform to ensure it is providing best value for money for parents”.

and on the important issue of games or PE kits, that schools should “ensure that the PE uniform is practical, comfortable and appropriate to the activity involved, and that consideration is given to the cost of compulsory PE clothing”.

That is non-statutory guidance for schools.

The right hon. Member for Birkenhead is right to draw attention to the issue of school uniforms and VAT. EU law allows the UK to have a zero rate of VAT on clothing and footwear designed for young children which is not suitable for older people. Therefore, clothing designed for children under 14 years old has no VAT on it. Over time, as children grow, their clothing becomes indistinguishable from that of adults. HM Revenue and Customs needs to operate size limits for the VAT relief to comply with EU law. The limits are based on the average size of 13-year-old children, using data provided by the British Standards Institution. It is inevitable that some children within the intended age range—such as the child cited by the right hon. Gentleman—will require larger articles of clothing or footwear that do not qualify for the relief. The Government are unable, under EU law, to extend the relief to encompass children beyond the average size. That is one of the reasons that our guidance is so firm in saying that schools should ensure their school uniform is affordable. I know the right hon. Gentleman has strong views on the EU and he may well get his way on this issue in due course.

Our existing best practice guidance emphasises the need for uniforms to be affordable. In fact, we advise school governing bodies to give the highest priority to cost considerations when making decisions about their
school uniform. Most schools already ensure that their uniforms are affordable. However, for the minority of schools that may not, the Government have announced their plan to legislate to put the school uniform guidance on a statutory footing to send a clear signal that we expect schools to ensure uniform costs are reasonable.

The hon. Member for Ogmore (Chris Elmore) raised the issue of financial help and school funding grants. In England, some local authorities provide discretionary grants to help with buying school uniforms. Local authorities that offer such grants set their own criteria for eligibility, and schools may offer clothing schemes, such as second-hand uniforms at reduced prices. Schools may also choose to use their pupil premium funding to offer subsidies or grants for school uniforms.

The hon. Member for York Central (Rachael Maskell) raised the issue of recycling, of games kits in particular. I remember that I wore a second-hand rugby kit in some of the years at my school, and that was significantly cheaper than buying the kit brand new—I was not a particularly good rugby player, so it would not have been money well spent.

To conclude, I am grateful to the right hon. Member for Birkenhead for raising this issue and to other right hon. and hon. Members for contributing to the debate. Important issues have been raised. I hope that he is content to some extent that the Government echo his concern and content about the steps that we have taken to underline the importance of the cost of school uniform in helping the most disadvantaged members of society to access to a good school place and a good education. We want to ensure that the cost of uniform does not act as a barrier to getting a good education and a good school place.

Siobbhain McDonagh (in the Chair): I apologise to Members for my mistakes in chairing the sitting. The faults were entirely mine.

6.30 pm 

Motion lapsed (Standing Order No. 10(6)).

Modern-day Slavery

6.30 pm

Gareth Snell (Stoke-on-Trent Central) (Lab/Co-op): I beg to move,

That this House has considered tackling modern-day slavery.

It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Ms McDonagh. Before I progress with my short speech, I need to place on the record my thanks to my hon. Friend the Member for Gedling (Vernon Coaker), who cannot be present this evening because he is away at the Parliamentary Assembly of the Council of Europe. His chairmanship of the all-party parliamentary group on human trafficking and modern slavery does so much to ensure that this issue is always at the top of the political agenda.

I also briefly place on the record my thanks to the Co-operative party for pursuing the matter so vociferously. The Co-operative party has ensured that modern slavery is now taken exceptionally seriously both inside this place and outside. As a result of its vociferous campaigning, 30 local authorities have signed up voluntarily to a modern slavery charter that takes them above and beyond the requirements of the Modern Slavery Act 2015, which I shall talk about later. Clearly, a concerted political effort can ensure that we get safety for people fleeing horrible circumstances.

Maggie Throup (Erewash) (Con): I apologise for intervening on the hon. Gentleman so early on, but I wanted to put something on the record as well: the great contribution made in the other place by Alastair Redfern, the Bishop of Derby, as we took the Bill through both Houses to become the Act. Without his dogged determination, we would probably not be sat in this Chamber today having this debate. He has actually just retired as Bishop of Derby, at the end of August. I am sure that putting that on the record will be well received by him and the people who worked with him.

Gareth Snell: It is true that where we are today is the result of a collective effort and political will across not only this House but Parliament as a whole. That is demonstrated not only by the number of Members present today but by how the matter has been pursued through APPGs, private Members’ legislation and amendments to various other Bills.

Mr Barry Sheerman (Huddersfield) (Lab/Co-op): Before my hon. Friend moves on, may I add another name to the list of the illustrious? Home for Good, a Christian charity, has been working so hard to raise the profile of the real dangers of certain institutions that look as though they are orphanages but are actually involved in the trade. Separation of children from parents—even from one parent—is a dangerous activity. Will he look at the Home for Good report and study it carefully? He will find it very helpful?

Gareth Snell: I thank the hon. Gentleman—

Mr Sheerman: Hon. Friend!

Gareth Snell: Indeed, he is my friend, but he is now only the second most famous person from Huddersfield following the debut of the new Dr Who. I do not know whether he has a sonic screwdriver, but we can sort one out for him.
My hon. Friend is right. A number of organisations and charities sent me briefing notes, and what I found interesting as all that information came into my office was the sheer volume of work being done quietly and diligently to ensure that this issue of our young people and others being abused and exploited is tackled. If we look at the work and try to quantify it, we can see that in addition to the efforts of Government and Parliament, civil society is once again demonstrating that it is a force for good.

Mr Jim Cunningham (Coventry South) (Lab): This is a timely debate. Has my hon. Friend’s all-party group looked at the legislation that was passed some years ago after the tragedy in Morecombe bay and the problems with gangmasters? Has he any comments on that? I am surprised that we still experience modern-day exploitation— for want of a better term—in all age groups.

Gareth Snell: My hon. Friend must be somewhat prescient, because he has read ahead in my speech before I have managed to get to that point. I shall touch on it later.

I welcome the announcement by the Government of the review of the Modern Slavery Act, which will be ably chaired by my right hon. Friend the Member for Birkenhead (Frank Field) and the right hon. Member for Basingstoke (Mrs Miller), as well as the noble Lady Butler-Sloss. That is a triumvirate of expertise if ever there were one. I am grateful to my right hon. Friend for being present this afternoon.

I want to talk about the processes in the Modern Slavery Act. It was a step forward in properly attacking and dealing with some of the horrible situations people find themselves in, but it also contained important preventive measures that helped to reduce modern slavery in all forms, whether sexual exploitation, domestic servitude, forced labour or criminal exploitation.

For me, one of the most important parts of the Act is section 54, which requires large companies with a turnover of £36 million or more to place on record transparency in their supply chains. Such modern slavery statements are a welcome process to deal with these problems but, if we are honest and up front, the implementation is simply not working properly. At a meeting of the Public Accounts Committee, on which I sit, the Home Office confirmed that it does not compile a list of companies that may be required to make a declaration, does not have a list of those that have done so and, importantly, does not maintain the database. Any further analysis of the information in the declarations is made by non-governmental organisations.

Darren Jones (Bristol North West) (Lab): On that point, will my hon. Friend join me in congratulating TISCreport, which was developed and is based in Bristol? It has looked at the 18,000 companies with revenue of more than £36 million, and it is the only organisation that maintains a database of the companies that comply with section 54. The database is now searchable via a zoomable map. Will he encourage the Minister to engage with TISCreport and to allow it to help the Home Office in its endeavours?

Gareth Snell: My hon. Friend makes an excellent point. NGOs are doing some excellent work but, fundamentally, I believe that such work should be done by the Home Office and by Government—because we are talking about something set out in statute—rather than relying on the benevolence of third-party organisations.

Despite the work of the organisation in my hon. Friend’s constituency, and even though the matter has been progressed, I know that the Minister is aware of concerns about how section 54 is being implemented. Back in April I asked a question in the Chamber of a Department for International Development Minister, who confirmed that a hub was being set up. Will the Minister present today confirm what progress has been made on that hub?

What is really worrying, however, is that an investigation by The Guardian demonstrated that of the companies that had made a modern slavery statement, more than two thirds had failed to refer specifically to the risk of modern slavery. They had made a declaration, but it did not comply with the requirements of the Act. More worryingly, only 19% of all agricultural businesses that should be making a statement have done so, and that is an area in which exploitation could be rife.

Unfortunately, because everything is being done by third-party NGOs, the ability to compel necessary information simply does not exist. Until the Government introduce something on a formal statutory basis, more and more organisations will seek to put aside their responsibilities. The Co-operative Group, which I shall talk about later, has estimated that it is cheaper and easier for organisations simply to ignore the requirements than it is for them to produce the statements and submit them. There is no validation and so no penalty for failing to make a declaration.

The section 54 requirement also applies only to commercial organisations. The public sector, however, is a huge spender of money—billions and billions of pounds are spent in procurement—yet no public authority is required to make declarations to demonstrate their actions to reduce modern slavery. Were we to extend section 54 to cover public bodies and authorities, that might not stop certain aspects of modern slavery happening, but we would be able to have oversight of where the billions of pounds in public procurement are ultimately being spent, and Members could look for the impact on modern slavery.

Anne Marie Morris (Newton Abbot) (Con): Does the hon. Gentleman agree that smaller businesses ought to be included in the overall remit of the Act? After all, they include nail bars and people working on tips. If we had a system whereby when a licence was granted by local authorities, businesses had to tick a box on their compliance with modern-day slavery rules, that would be a real step forward.

Gareth Snell: The hon. Lady is absolutely right. The current scope of section 54 is well meaning, and in some ways if it was implemented correctly it would have a huge impact on large organisations. But if we are being honest and up front, most of the places where modern slavery is perpetrated in the UK are small businesses that are not properly regulated. It is tied employment, with people living in a room above a shop and being told that their rent and board is all paid for as part of their salary but, “By the way, you can’t ever leave us.” Local authorities having a remit would be a way of tackling that. However, we must be clear that if we are
to give local authorities new responsibilities, new funding must come with that, because simply asking local authorities to do more with their depleted amounts of money simply will not do.

Dr David Drew (Stroud) (Lab/Co-op): Does my hon. Friend accept that modern slavery sometimes happens at an individual level? I have a case where someone was brought to this country for work, to look after someone’s care needs. Yet when the care was no longer needed, they got rid of them and refused to pay the money they owed, and that person is now completely rootless and needs support in this country. Does he see that as a particular problem?

Gareth Snell: My hon. Friend is absolutely right; I will touch on individual cases later on, where there should be greater support and strength for victims of modern slavery.

Luciana Berger (Liverpool, Wavertree) (Lab/Co-op): I thank my hon. Friend for making the important point about the contribution of local authorities. Local authorities are under incredible financial pressure, as he rightly outlined, but 40 local authorities have still signed up to the charter, one of which is my council, Liverpool City Council. In the spirit of the cross-party attendance at this debate, does he agree that it is vital that councils, no matter their political make-up, debate and adopt that charter as quickly as possible?

Gareth Snell: I could not agree more with my hon. Friend. It is sad that the council that I used to lead, which is now not run by our political party, decided not to adopt the charter because it is worried about being too political. I am not sure how we can be too unpolitical in tackling modern slavery, but unfortunately there are still some organisations and local authorities that see the issue as partisan. If only they looked at Parliament, where partisan issues have been put aside and everyone looks at this issue collectively to find ways of dealing with it across both Houses and across parties, they could learn some valuable lessons from us. My hon. Friend is right that where local authorities are going above and beyond they are making a real difference to individuals whose existence would otherwise be one of daily toil and exploitation. The more we can do to tackle that, locally or nationally, the better.

Jim McMahon (Oldham West and Royton) (Lab/Co-op): I congratulate my hon. Friend on securing the debate. Does he agree that for victims of modern-day slavery, rebuilding their lives is a challenge in itself? I pay tribute to the Co-operative Group and other businesses that are offering paid work placements for victims of modern-day slavery.

Gareth Snell: My hon. Friend is absolutely right; I will touch on individual cases later on, where there should be greater support and strength for victims of modern slavery.

John Spellar: For Warley!

Gareth Snell: They will name it after you one day, I suppose.

John Spellar: My hon. Friend mentioned the role of local authorities in providing a lead. The role of my own council, Sandwell, has been recognised with a public award, precisely for working with other agencies to tackle this menace. Councils and public bodies also have to be receptive to information; many people who live next to the places involved and sometimes go in and work in them provide information. The authorities—whether the police, the Home Office or the local authorities—have powers, but they need to be receptive to the information and use the powers they have, even though they need more.

Gareth Snell: As always, my right hon. Friend is absolutely spot on. I would add that local authorities have struggled with their existing requirements. If we are to give them more things to do, and I think we can, that has to come with the required funding. This is too important to do half a job badly; I would rather we did all the job properly. Once again, Sandwell Council in the west midlands demonstrates how that can be done. Having heard my right hon. Friend’s intervention, I am sure that other councils will look to Sandwell as a model to follow in future.

I will move on to one of the things that the Government could do to actively address all the points being raised. Baroness Young’s Modern Slavery (Transparent Supply Chains) Bill would extend the section 54 clauses to cover almost everything that has been discussed. The Bill would allow for local authorities, public bodies and smaller organisations, including commercial organisations, to be covered by the requirement to make declarations. The more information we have, the easier it will be to tackle this scourge. I ask the Government to do slightly more. They can no longer rely on non-governmental organisations and charities to enforce the will of Parliament as expressed through the Modern Slavery Act. There has to be direct Government responsibility for the collection and analysis of the data that they have asked to be produced.

I ask the Minister to update the House on the process for appointing the new Independent Anti-slavery Commissioner. That role has been empty since May. According to the Home Office documentation, a meeting should take place this week to shortlist candidates. I wonder whether we are still on track for that. Given the comments of Kevin Hyland about his independence as he left that post, I ask the Minister to reassure us that those comments have been taken on board and that the new Independent Anti-slavery Commissioner, whoever that may be, will have the powers, responsibilities and independence they need to do the work that we all know and agree is needed.

To move on from the processes, behind every statistic, case and referral there is an individual whose life has been turned upside down and torn apart because of modern slavery. The Walk Free Foundation estimates that there are 136,000 victims of modern slavery in the UK alone. To put that into context, that figure is equivalent to the population of West Bromwich, Gloucester or Worcester being enslaved in the UK. We should all
be worried about that, because unless we tackle this root and branch, we cannot hold ourselves up as a compassionate society.

There is also an international element to the issue: £14 billion of goods are imported into the UK. We can all be pretty much guaranteed that some of those products will be made by slaves or people in servitude. Everyone here and watching at home—I am sure there are millions of them—can be almost certain that something in their home, wardrobe or car will have been made by a slave. Statistically, it is likely that at some point, every single one of us will have an item of clothing made by a slave, if we do not already. We must take that very seriously, because our obligations do not rest domestically; we should set the standard around the world. As our post-Brexit trade negotiations take place, we should ensure that an ethical trade policy that tackles modern slavery here and overseas forms part of our trade policy. If we can use our purchasing power to make the world a better place, we have a duty to do so.

The National Crime Agency statistics from the national referral mechanism suggest that roughly 1,600 referrals are made each quarter. In the first quarter of this year and the second quarter of last year combined, just over 3,200 referrals were made. Although the victims predominantly came from the United Kingdom, they spanned 87 different countries. In the UK, people of 87 nationalities made a referral to the national referral mechanism. What is good about the Modern Slavery Act is that the perpetrators are being prosecuted. Only last week, Zakaria Mohammed was prosecuted under the Act for drug dealing using children and county lines. Although the act of drug dealing itself should be punished—I do not think anyone would object to that—the fact that the use of exploited children in a servitude role was prosecuted sends a message that we are taking this seriously.

Mr Sheerman: My hon. Friend has put his finger on the fact that some very wicked people organise this trade, and they are clever. People up and down the country—this is true even in the case of my pet subject found in an enslaved situation, working on building sites for £5 a day. Some of the families had to spend their evenings begging for food because they simply were not able to provide food for their children. One of those 37 people was a one-year-old. If we are serious about tackling this issue, we should start with situations like that.

Another problem, which I am sure the Minister will be able to help us with, is what happens once someone has been identified as a victim of modern slavery. The national referral mechanism is non-statutory. Someone who gets a positive conclusive grounds decision has no legal status. They are simply someone we have almost taken pity on—we support them out of benevolence, not because there is a requirement in law for us to do so.

The Government promised last October to increase the duration of support for people who receive a positive conclusive grounds decision from 14 days to 45 days. I understand that that is still in the process of being worked up—it is not actually being implemented. Again, if the Government wished to demonstrate that they take that promise seriously, they could easily announce that they will bring it forward as soon as possible.

Frank Field (Birkenhead) (Ind): As I have told my hon. Friend, I will have to leave the debate to talk about sanctions in a moment. When we—Members of Parliament and Members of the House of Lords—scoped the original Modern Slavery Bill, the most stunning and terrible evidence we took was from people who had been enslaved. The idea that people get over such bondage easily was knocked sideways by all that. We were in tears listening to the evidence of people who had been broken by modern slavery, but the Government have only just begun to think about that issue.

Gareth Snell: We can see from that thoughtful intervention why my right hon. Friend is absolutely the right person to co-chair the review of the Modern Slavery Act. As I said, every statistic is a person whose life has been turned upside down. At the moment, an individual who is found to have been through modern slavery gets 14 days’ support. I do not know about anyone else in the Chamber, but that does not seem sufficient to me. In fact, 45 days really is not enough. The Government made that commitment last October and they should implement it now, but I ask that they do so as an interim step. As my right hon. Friend the Chair of the Work and Pensions Committee says, that would be a step forward, but it would not be enough to establish a pathway for recovery.

There is something the Government could do today to give some semblance of an impression that they want to do something about this issue. They could announce that they will support Lord McColl’s Modern Slavery (Victim Support) Bill, which has been through the House of Lords and has its support. If they guaranteed Government support for that Bill so that it could proceed in Government time sooner rather than later, I am sure that it would get cross-party support and be one of the fastest pieces of legislation to pass the House of Commons.

That Bill would extend support to 12 months—it would give people who have been through horrendous situations a year’s support. Someone who comes out of modern slavery and needs help should receive it because the state and the people want to give it to them, not because of benevolence and charity. Charity is a cold thing—it is self-selecting. The state should be there to provide help and support. I am sure the Minister will be
able to indicate one way or the other whether the Government have any interest in supporting Lord McColl’s Bill. I am sure Opposition Members would be happy to vote with the Government if they did support it.

As my hon. Friend the Member for Oldham West and Royton (Jim McMahon) pointed out, there are organisations doing work in this area. I am going to talk again about the Co-op Group’s Bright Future partnership. That organisation has brought together charities, providers and first responders to give people who have been through modern slavery a way into paid employment—a route back to dignity without waiting for charity. By 2020, more than 300 victims of modern slavery will have been given their lives back through that project. We should commend the Co-op Group for leading the way with that work. I know many other companies are looking at the Co-op Group’s work. All I can say to them is, “Go and ask, and help. They will help you become part of this life-changing partnership.”

We need to prevent people from falling back into slavery. The 45-day period does not give those who are entitled to be in the UK enough time to apply for the required benefits, and it does not give those who are not entitled to be in the UK time to apply for leave to remain. It simply sets them up to fail on day 46. As a society, we simply must not allow that.

I am conscious of the time, so I will wrap up with some very quick points. I am aware that the Minister has a file of information to inform her reply, but I ask her to focus on six very simple areas.

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for the Home Department (Victoria Atkins): Just the six?

Gareth Snell: Just the six, yes. I have written them down, so it is very easy. Will the Government consider expanding section 54 to cover public bodies and smaller corporates? That would be a good step. Will the Minister update us on the Government’s role in creating a database to properly enforce and actively police modern slavery declarations? Will she update us on where the Government are with the Independent Anti-slavery Commissioner post and guarantee that person’s independence? Will she, as an interim measure, implement the 45-day support that her Government promised in October 2017? Most importantly, if she confirmed that the Government were willing to support Lord McColl’s Modern Slavery (Victim Support) Bill, we could all leave this place very happy people.

Several hon. Members rose—

Siobhain McDonagh (in the Chair): Order. As you are aware, there are many Members here and there is not much time left. I will call first those who informed the Chair that they wanted to speak, and you will have just over two minutes each. I call Fiona Bruce.

6.57 pm

Fiona Bruce (Congleton) (Con): I will focus chiefly on the support that is available to victims of trafficking to help prevent them from being left homeless, destitute and at risk of being re-trafficked. I support the proposal that the Government should adopt the Modern Slavery (Victim Support) Bill.

Mention was made of the proposal to extend the move-on period from 14 days to 45 days. At the moment, that period is inadequate. It does not give people time to establish stable building blocks for their future. It is not long enough for non-UK nationals to apply for and be granted discretionary leave to remain, which gives victims access to housing benefit and other services. Extending that period to 12 months and offering victims accommodation and financial and other support, according to their needs, would enable victims to establish much more secure futures.

I know that the Government are concerned that that might prevent the removal of foreign criminals, but the Bill makes an exception for sexual or violent offenders who pose a genuine, present and serious risk to members of the public. The Government may also be concerned about cost, but the number of eligible victims each year would be very low. In 2016, just 1,133 people were confirmed as victims of trafficking with a positive conclusive grounds decision, so that proposal is unlikely to have a great impact on immigration.

Another concern is that people may self-identify as enslaved, but it is accepted that the opposite is ordinarily the case. Victims are often reluctant to come forward, for fear of retribution by their traffickers or fear of the authorities, or due to a perceived lack of long-term protection, which the Bill would address. In addition, victims cannot refer themselves to the NRM—that can be done only by a designated first responder organisation.

Finally, the proposal that the Government should offer six-month drop-in support, although positive, is inadequate. That period needs to be longer so that people can establish their futures.

Siobhain McDonagh (in the Chair): Well done.

6.59 pm

Stephanie Peacock (Barnsley East) (Lab): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairship, Ms McDonagh. I congratulate my hon. Friend the Member for Stoke-on-Trent Central (Gareth Snell) on securing this important debate. I am pleased to follow the hon. Member for Congleton (Fiona Bruce).

It is only right that those who have experienced the appalling practice of modern slavery are provided with the support, tools and skills they need to get on in life. That is why I will focus my brief comments on Northern College in Barnsley and its “Free Thinking” programme, which is the first course of its kind. Earlier this year, it supported 14 survivors on a 10-week course, helping them to adapt to their freedom with tutoring in subjects such as English, maths and IT; and helping to restore qualities such as self-confidence and trust in humanity.

It was a privilege to visit the course and moving and inspiring to meet the survivors and hear their stories. Their own words speak of its success. One said:

“I’ve got more confidence…. I can notice myself getting better and better every week that I come here.”

Another said:

“I feel that I have really achieved something and that when I leave Northern College, I will feel able to apply for more…education. I am trying to move on from my past. This is a big step.”

Others have spoken of its impact on their families. There is an on-site crèche that allows parents to take part in the course, which has a positive impact on the children too.
Northern College has pioneered the course, but not without facing obstacles. Some survivors may meet the requirements for funding but struggle with complex rules. Others have no access to transport. The Home Office’s immigration bail regulations had been prohibitive for many survivors but, following my question in the House earlier this year, I am pleased that the guidance has been changed. I thank the Secretary of State for meeting me.

The “Free Thinking” course provides a blueprint for how we can make progress in addressing the terrible injustice of modern slavery here in the UK. I will end with the words of another survivor on the impact of the course:

“Sometimes I get down, but I’m very lucky to still be here. If I wasn’t here, my story would just be in the past tense.”

7.1 pm

Andrew Selous (South West Bedfordshire) (Con): Centuries after Wilberforce abolished the slave trade, it is a disgrace that around the world today some 27 million people are in modern slavery. I have had three big instances of it in my constituency on Traveller sites. In the first, 24 people were released from slavery. Some of them had been there for a decade or more, and 19 of them were British citizens. It is horrendous.

The NHS in particular can do a lot more—it is not as good as it should be at spotting victims of modern slavery. The all-party parliamentary group on human trafficking and modern slavery met the parents of a young, English learning-disabled man who was taken to a Welsh hospital to have his leg reset after he had fallen off a horse while being held captive. He was taken back again, and no one thought to ask any questions about why he was brought in with a group of Irish people who were not speaking with the same accent as him.

Good work is going on in some Welsh academic institutions to ensure that training on modern slavery becomes compulsory in undergraduate and postgraduate settings and for all healthcare staff. It should have the same priority as child protection training within the NHS. That would make a huge difference, because the “Provider Responses Treatment and Care for Trafficked People” report by King’s College London showed that one in five victims of modern slavery comes into contact with healthcare professionals.

Last month, the Australian House of Representatives passed a modern slavery Bill that recognised orphanage trafficking, which has been defined as “the active recruitment of children from families and communities into residential care institutions in overseas countries for the purposes of foreign funding and voluntourism.”

The hon. Member for Huddersfield (Mr Sheerman) is right to raise this point. We need to be world-leading to try to gather data and best practice and to share that. All credit to the Government for setting it up.

I have a couple of broader points. Modern-day slavery is very different from the old days of individuals in chains. It is less visible and tends to be psychology driven by greed and a pernicious desire to profit from excessively cheap labour, happening in plain sight. Sadly, my constituency has not been immune. In 2015, we had our first—I hope it is our last—conviction for modern-day slavery. Hungarian workers were promised good jobs and somewhere to stay, working in bed manufacturing, but on arrival they were shoved into dilapidated houses, some with up to 42 men living in two-bedroom properties, forced to work 10 to 16 hours a day, five to seven days a week, sometimes for as little as £10 a day, making beds for John Lewis and Next. It is a vile, disgusting crime, preying on workers desperate to forge a better life for themselves and their families. Thankfully, after excellent investigation work by local police, the owner was rightly convicted and sent to prison.

I am proud that the parent company of my local biscuit manufacturer, Fox’s Biscuits—I worked there in my teens—2 Sisters, has signed up to the Co-op’s Bright Future anti-slavery campaign. That scheme has worked with more than 30 victims of modern-day slavery who are now in employment and able to rebuild their lives.

Of course, we all have a part to play. As consumers, we have a duty to prevent exploitation by realising that if something looks like a ridiculous bargain, somewhere around the world someone has been exploited. We must step up and be accountable, empower those vulnerable to slavery, promote access to decent work and support trade unions. I also encourage anyone watching who feels they have seen or heard something to use the modern-day slavery helpline if needs be. The most vulnerable are relying on us.

7.5 pm

Anne Marie Morris (Newton Abbot) (Con): I take a particular interest in this topic because the police lead of the modern slavery taskforce is based in Exmouth in Devon, paid for from the police transformation fund. I commend the work it is doing, which I have been to see, to try to gather data and best practice and to share that. All credit to the Government for setting it up.

I have a couple of broader points. Modern-day slavery is very different from the old days of individuals in chains. It is less visible and tends to be psychology first—break the spirit and then the body. However, while everyone would say that slavery is a bad thing, people do not believe that it is happening in this country. There is a big challenge in getting the Great British public to accept that it is here; they cannot keep saying that it is not. Perhaps we need a Jamie Oliver to champion this cause.

The public have no idea what to look for. We have police guidance about looking for drawn curtains, but frankly if I were to knock on the door of every house in my constituency with drawn curtains, that would be quite a number. We need to do better. The reporting mechanisms do not include how charities and others, who are often more likely to come into contact with such individuals, can have a voice. That is an area to look at.

To get this right, we need clarity on what the Modern Slavery Act covers, because some economic crimes are better dealt with under employment and tax legislation, and other things are better dealt with under domestic legislation.
Businesses must recognise that there is a brand issue. Philips has been phenomenal in what it has done to unearth modern-day slavery issues. There are many programmes to help, but only the willing come forward, so more must be done to ensure that that changes.

We must move towards a victim-focused and less crime-focused approach, with not just the police and immigration authorities but others getting involved. Good job so far, Government, but there is more work to be done.

7.7 pm

Darren Jones (Bristol North West) (Lab): I thank my hon. Friend the Member for Stoke-on-Trent Central (Gareth Snell) for securing this important debate and for introducing another six tests to remember. I support every single one of them.

I will make a very short speech—not least because I have only two minutes—about the unintended priority that this became as a consequence of being the new MP for Bristol North West. I grew up and have lived in my constituency for most of my life, but I never knew that modern slavery was happening place on my doorstep; it was not until I was elected that I came face to face with it, both through constituents in my surgeries and as a result of raids in Bristol thanks to the excellent work of Avon and Somerset police. I now understand about Bristol’s excellent history with Unseen, which provides the national modern slavery helpline, which was established and is based in Bristol.

TISC report, which I have already mentioned, is looking at supply chains’ compliance with the Modern Slavery Act. I should add that even though I agree with my hon. Friend the Member for Stoke-on-Trent Central that the Home Office should have a statutory responsibility to ensure that data is used properly, that does not mean that it cannot work with non-governmental bodies to ensure it is done in the best possible way.

In my final minute, let me say that this is not just a domestic issue but an international one. We in the United Kingdom have something to be proud of in our work at home as well as abroad. I had the pleasure of being in Nairobi for 36 hours with the Commonwealth Parliamentary Association during the summer recess, where I saw at first hand the impact that British money is having on the ground in Kenya not only in aid but in security. British police officers were working with Kenyan police officers to massively increase the enforcement potential in investigation on the ground, although interestingly there was a lack of resourcing for victim support—something that was pledged to change as a consequence of the CPA organising meetings between non-governmental organisations and Kenyan politicians.

My one question for the Minister—I am sorry to be the one to introduce the Brexit word—is whether the projects on the ground in Kenya and other countries that are co-funded by the European Union and the United Kingdom will continue to be funded in a no-deal scenario.

7.9 pm

Mr Gavin Shuker (Luton South) (Lab/Co-op): I thank my hon. Friend for securing this debate. I am extremely grateful to take part in it.

I was present in the 2015 Parliament, and I can attest to the Modern Slavery Act being a great leap forward, but it was an Act with a hole at the centre. I understand why Ministers at that time made the judgment they did, but achieving the Government’s ambition will be impossible unless we tackle the demand driving sex trafficking in our country, a form of modern slavery that almost exclusively targets women. As the hon. Member for South West Bedfordshire (Andrew Selous) and I can attest, in Bedfordshire alone 53% of modern-day slavery cases over the past four years have been about sexual exploitation. The majority of women who are put through the national referral mechanism are trafficked into this country for sex.

I chair the all-party parliamentary group on prostitution and the global sex trade. In our most recent report we demonstrated just how prolifically and how often women, mostly from eastern Europe, are trafficked around the UK, in a network of properties, in a revolving door of sexual exploitation organised by gangs to evade police detection. We talked about that in a previous debate. In that context, it is really difficult to understand why the review does not specifically target that point—perhaps the Minister can say something about that.

We know what we need to do: we need to support victims properly; criminal sanctions for soliciting on the street should be removed, to support women subject to street-based sexual exploitation in seeking help and exiting it; and demand needs to be tackled by making paying for sex a criminal offence in England and Wales. We should also target businesses that are profiting from the trade. Many countries around Europe have taken that approach, and we have seen the benefit. I hope that the Government will reflect on that as the review goes forward.

7.11 pm

Amelie Dodds (Oxford East) (Lab/Co-op): I would like to endorse pretty much everything that everyone has said, but particularly the comments made by my hon. Friend the Member for Stoke-on-Trent Central (Gareth Snell). I will not repeat anything he said, but I will make three quick points.

First, we need to be aware that investigating modern slavery is enormously resource-intensive for police forces. We have heard reference to the entirely appropriate use of resources in relation to the disgusting county lines phenomenon, which sadly affects my city of Oxford, as well as many other places. We had a large trial associated with modern slavery in Oxford, Operation Rouge, but the processes needed to build up the right evidence for trials involve intensive and expensive use of police resources. We need to acknowledge that, particularly in the context of such significant cuts to policing. In that regard, we also need sustainable funding for innovations such as the independent trauma advisory service, commissioned by Thames Valley police and operating in Oxford and Reading. It is working well but needs to put on a sustainable footing.

Second, we need to spread examples of good practice more widely. Sadly, my city had to learn about some of the problems the hard way. After Operation Bullfinch we learned quickly that agencies had not worked together in the way that they should have done to protect vulnerable people. That has led to the hotel watch scheme in Oxford and extensive training for city council officers. Other places should not have to go through that in order to learn from the experience.
7.13 pm

Siobhain McDonagh (in the Chair): Order. We have managed to get all the Back Benchers in. I have put a squeeze on the Front Benchers’ contributions, so I would be grateful if they were all mindful of that.

7.17 pm

Caroline Lucas (Brighton, Pavilion) (Green): A couple of things. First of all, I want to pay tribute to the work of the all-party parliamentary group on modern slavery. It has been exemplary, and I want to pay particular tribute to its chair, Andrew Dismore, and its vice-chair, Margaret Ferrier. I want to pay tribute to the many stakeholders who have appeared before the group and to the staff who have worked so hard to ensure that its work has been so effective. I will say to the Minister, on the basis of the evidence that we have received, that it is time for the Government to come forward with a comprehensive anti-trafficking strategy that will make sure that every area of the UK is protected, that the victims of modern slavery are properly supported, and that those who are responsible for trafficking are properly punished.

7.18 pm

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for the Home Department (Victoria Atkins): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairship, Ms McDonagh. Perhaps this is the new model for how we should do business in this House—we have had incisive and effective speeches in two minutes.

I congratulate the hon. Member for Stoke-on-Trent Central (Gareth Snell) for securing this debate. It is a timely opportunity to start contributing to the welcome review that the Government have announced. I congratulate all hon. Members for covering so much ground in so little time—I will try to do a little bit of justice to the debate.

I pay tribute to the work of the all-party parliamentary group. It is not just the chairs who have incredible expertise and commitment. At the few meetings that I have been able to attend all the members have contributed fantastically, as has been illustrated by hon. Members’ speeches. It is also good to see that the Minister and officials are engaging. I think everyone is genuinely committed to doing their best to try to tackle this horrendous issue. Hon. Members have, quite rightly, paid tribute to the huge range of individuals and institutions that are doing tremendous work on this issue. We are dealing with horrible offences, as the hon. Member for Batley and Spen (Tracy Brabin) eloquently and powerfully set out.

The question we have tried to cover is how we can improve some of our response. The first issue raised was support for victims. There have been calls to put support on a statutory footing, as has happened in equivalent legislation in Northern Ireland and Scotland. The Government here may now want to do that. We have also talked about extending the period for which support is in place to 45 days. After consultation with victims and NGOs in Scotland, the Government there have extended the period from 45 days to 90 days. We have to be evidence-led, and it may well be in due course that that is shown to be insufficient—the Government here may want to look at that as well.

That brings us on to the immigration rules. I used to be an immigration solicitor and I have to say, I find it incredibly difficult to understand what the status of victims is after they have been through the national referral mechanism. There is definitively a need for clarity and simplification. I agree with the recommendation of the Work and Pensions Committee of an automatic period of leave, which could be for up to a year.

A number of hon. Members raised issues about training and the resourcing of frontline staff who will encounter victims of modern slavery. We heard about the police, and we have had reports from Her Majesty’s inspectorate of constabulary as well as the Haughey review. There is a lot of work to do around sharing best practice from forces that do a very good job, such as Greater Manchester police. Some forces are doing it well, but can we expand that work? Other hon. Members mentioned local authorities and the health service as well.

Finally, there are a couple of issues that I will just mention in passing. We need to look again at the stage at which victims of modern slavery are entitled to legal aid, because they have big decisions to make before they have access to important legal advice. Finally, one or two hon. Members touched on Brexit. We could have a whole separate debate on the implications of Brexit for ethical trade, justice and home affairs co-operation and all sorts of other things, but I will leave it to the two other Front Benchers to expand on some of those points.
We have heard today the cross-party understanding in the House of the horrors presented by modern slavery. This terrible crime can be committed in various ways, yet every time we are told of slavery I am surprised by the range of offences and the ability of human beings to be evil to one another. We saw the case this week of the gentleman who was found in Cumbria. It is beyond my comprehension, and everyone else’s, I am sure, how that person could have been treated in that way.

The Government are really proud of our introducing the Modern Slavery Act 2015, with the consent of Parliament. We are determined to ensure that that legislation remains world-leading in the face of the evolving threat, which is why we have commissioned an independent review of the Act to examine what is working well and what more can be done to improve its implementation. I am extremely grateful to my right hon. Friend the Member for Basingstoke (Mrs Miller) and Baroness Butler-Sloss for leading that work.

On the support that we give victims, I hope hon. Members will forgive me for taking this opportunity to announce that the independent child trafficking advocate service will be extended to children in the west midlands next week, on Anti-slavery Day. These advocates provide invaluable specialist support to child victims of modern slavery, and new regional co-ordinators will help local areas to identify and support UK victims. That will be followed by a further roll-out in the east midlands in January and in the London borough of Croydon in April, meaning that advocates will be available in one third of all local authorities in England and Wales.

Next week, I will launch the UK’s day of action for the AMINA project, which aims to safeguard children from being trafficked across European borders. The project, in partnership with End Child Prostitution and Trafficking UK and Missing Children Europe, is a joint initiative between law enforcement, civil society and Government, and brings together agencies from across six countries to keep safe children on the move.

We continue to make significant progress in reforming the national referral mechanism. We have already worked with six local authorities to test ways to improve the pathways from central support into local communities, increasing victims’ resilience to future exploitation.

Victoria Atkins: My hon. Friend knows the Government’s commitment to this issue. The new advocates will focus on UK victims because, as we have tested the ground with these schemes, we want the care of children trafficked into the UK—from Vietnam, for example—are different from those of children trafficked within the UK and who are already UK citizens. The pilots in those three areas are aimed at seeing whether we can improve the system for children who are not from the United Kingdom while also helping children who are. That is particularly relevant with the development of county lines and children being used within those gangs, which has been referred to today.

Finally on the NRM, the new victim care contract will come into effect in April 2020. It will include additional support, such as places of safety in advance of entering the NRM for those removed directly from situations of exploitation by law enforcement, as well as drop-in centres for victims for up to six months after they have left the NRM, because we understand that people need time to make the important decisions on how they want to be treated.

The hon. Member for Stoke-on-Trent Central rightly raised transparency in supply chains, on which we have world-leading legislation. I recently chaired a meeting of the business against slavery forum, which draws together chief executives of some of the world’s largest employers and organisations. We discussed what they are doing, what more can be done across business and how the Government can help with that. The forum includes organisations such as the Co-op, HSBC, Sky, Unilever, Vodafone, WPP, Barclays, BT, Associated British Foods and others, and there is real enthusiasm and energy in that group to help the UK tackle modern slavery.

However, too many businesses still fail to meet their basic legal obligation to publish transparency statements, or have shown that they are not taking serious action to tackle modern slavery. The Home Office will therefore over the next month write directly to the chief executives of 18,000 businesses considered to be in scope of the obligation. Those that persist in flouting their obligations can expect to face tougher consequences. The Government are also committed to tackling modern slavery in our own procurement. We are developing tools and guidance for contracting authorities in the public sector to help buyers mitigate risks of modern slavery and to take action where modern slavery is identified.

Law enforcement is a vital part of this picture. We want to successfully investigate and prosecute those who ensnare human beings in their gangs or slavery networks. We have invested £8.5 million to transform the police response through the modern slavery police transformation unit. That unit has established the intelligence base to target perpetrators and has developed bespoke training for frontline and senior detectives.

We are seeing encouraging results, with more than 950 live investigations currently under way, which, to put it into context, is up from 188 in 2016. There have been some very good convictions recently, as has been referred to, including last week the first conviction under modern slavery legislation of a county lines exploitation gang involving children. We want the message to be loud and clear: if a criminal gang leader exploits children in that way, they are guilty of grooming and should suffer the social stigma that that conveys.

Andrew Selous: I welcome the fact that child advocates are coming to some areas of the country, but I find it curious that the Government are not rolling out a range of public services in only some areas of the country. We should evaluate the roll-out and, if it is worth doing, we should do it everywhere.

Andrew Selous: I welcome the fact that child advocates are coming to some areas of the country, but I find it curious that the Government are not rolling out a range of public services in only some areas of the country. We should evaluate the roll-out and, if it is worth doing, we should do it everywhere.
Anne Marie Morris: Will the Minister consider extending the transformation funding to the Exmouth unit, which does such excellent work but which I suspect will not have finished doing what is needed by the end of its current grant?

Victoria Atkins: I will write to my hon. Friend on that. She will appreciate that the workings of the police transformation fund certainly cannot be explained in just two minutes.

I will move on to the international picture. The Prime Minister launched the global call to action to end modern slavery at last year’s UN General Assembly, with more than 80 countries now endorsing that pledge. It is an extraordinary, worldwide commitment that shows that those countries are determined to join us in tackling this terrible crime. We are supporting our international efforts with more than £200 million of UK aid, and we work closely with the countries from which the highest number of victims are trafficked to the UK. Later this week I will meet the Albanian Minister for human trafficking to build on our co-operation and to agree how we can continue to work together to tackle this abhorrent crime.

To answers the questions asked of me, first, Mr Hyland always struck me as being very independent as our Independent Anti-slavery Commissioner; I am always amused when it is suggested that he was not. Our recruitment of his successor is ongoing, and we are obviously keen to get the right person for the job as quickly as possible.

I am conscious of time, so if the hon. Member for Stoke-on-Trent Central will forgive me, I will write to him on the other points. I thank him for securing this important debate, and I very much hope that we will have the chance to debate this issue again soon in another Chamber.

Siobhain McDonagh (in the Chair): Gareth Snell has about 30 seconds to wind up the debate.

7.29 pm

Gareth Snell: I am good at winding up, Ms McDonagh. I thank the Minister for announcing that she will write to those 18,000 people. That is a good development, so far as I am concerned. I will write to her to try to pin her down slightly more on the early 2019 date; as we know, this Government think that autumn goes up to Christmas eve.

The appetite is there and the need is clear. The only thing holding us back is our political will. By our collective efforts, we can make a real difference in tackling modern slavery, particularly during this month.

7.30 pm

Motion lapsed, and sitting adjourned without Question put (Standing Order No. 10(14)).
Westminster Hall

Wednesday 10 October 2018

Nursery Sector: Sustainability

9.30 am

Chris Green (Bolton West) (Con): I beg to move, That this House has considered the sustainability of the nursery sector.

It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Mr Gapes. I appreciate the opportunity to have this important debate on the sustainability of the nursery sector. In recent years, I have increasingly seen and heard concerns about the sector, both through the media and through conversations in my constituency. What really brought the issue to a head for me was a meeting with the Federation of Small Businesses and a couple of local nurseries. They raised their current concerns about sustainability, rising costs, and the lack of a level playing field within the sector. Following that, I surveyed all of the nurseries in my constituency and got an incredibly strong response. Most of the nurseries replied, which shows that there is a great deal of interest in improving and reforming this area.

I will first talk about the enormous contribution that nurseries make to children and families in all of our constituencies. Nurseries provide a wonderful start in life for children. They provide opportunities for socialisation for children who are at home during their earliest years, so that they can meet other children in increasingly large age-based groups. When I say “socialisation”, I do not mean socialism; I mean the broader sense of meeting other people in the local community. Nurseries are also valuable for helping children prepare for primary school, as we know that people have concerns about how ready children are to take that step in their lives.

Nurseries are also important for parents, who can get advice about what they are doing as they raise their children, and meet other parents. Sometimes, having young children can feel very isolating for parents, and nurseries provide a good forum for them to meet other parents, get advice, and feel confident that they are doing the right thing—or to seek further advice if, perhaps, they are not. Nurseries provide parents with a very useful break from the children, and increasingly both parents work. The traditional, old-fashioned style of one parent, typically the mother, staying at home to raise the children is not so prevalent these days. Normally, both parents work, and nurseries provide a very important service, enabling both parents to go to work or perhaps re-enter the workforce.

Working in a nursery can be a great deal of fun: it is an enjoyable, rewarding form of work, and a nursery is also a really good business to own and run, because it is an interesting part of a local community. People who work in nurseries can see the children develop over the years, and the importance of the contribution their nursery makes to all those families.

The initial introduction of the universal 15 hours a week of free childcare was followed by a further 15 hours, but since then, there has been concern that funding has not kept pace, and does not provide all the moneys that nurseries require for the care that they deliver. Funding not keeping pace with costs is a concern, and nurseries have been finding ways of supplementing that income without increasing their hourly rate. For example, some nurseries have been charging additional money for lunch that far exceeds the actual cost of that lunch. Across the country, the average charge is about £10 per day. That is a very significant amount of money for a family to have to contribute on a weekly basis when they believed that the 30 hours of childcare was free. There is a strong narrative that what is offered is 30 hours of free childcare, which leads to problems for families when they are managing their budgets. They may have had a family conversation about whether a parent staying at home should go back to work, and what the household accounts would look like if they did, but if they then get a request from the nursery for more funding, that creates problems for that family. Having to have a conversation right from the off about what looks like a demand for more money also creates a difficult start to the relationship between the family and the nursery.

This support is there to help people; of course, there is an aspect of education for the children, but the support is clearly also there to support people in the workplace. However, it last for only 38 weeks of the year. Most people do not work 38 weeks in the year, so what about the remaining weeks in which the family has to make up the difference? Again, many people have the understanding that what is offered is 30 hours of free childcare a week; they would not think that meant 30 hours of free childcare just during school term time, in essence. Of course, that is a concern for many parents, but especially for parents on very low pay, for whom any surprising additional outgoings will be quite a shock to the system.

Across my constituency, nurseries have raised concerns about business rates. If children are supported for 38 weeks, they will often attend for 38 weeks; the parents will look after the children for the rest of that time, or will perhaps find some mechanism involving their extended family. However, the business rates are set as though the business is being operated for the entire year, so if that nursery is over the threshold to pay business rates, it will in effect be receiving the money for 38 weeks but paying business rates for 52 weeks. If there is not flexibility over that 30 hours of bringing in more money, that creates a challenge.

There is also a concern about VAT. If a nursery is associated with a primary school, that nursery has the ability to reclaim VAT, because it is part of an educational institution. However, a nursery not associated with a primary school does not have the opportunity to claim that money back, which does not demonstrate a level playing field between the two. That is a problem. Councils also take a cut, and I welcome the fact that the Government have driven the expectation that the amount of money going from national Government to the council and then on to the nursery will go up from 93% to 95%. I am pleased that Wigan Council has already achieved that goal of 95% of money going to the nursery, and that Bolton Council is a level ahead, with 97% of its money going from the council to the nursery. It is important that councils are recognised for that commitment to ensure as much money goes to nurseries as possible.
Julie Cooper (Burnley) (Lab): Does the hon. Gentleman accept that the fact that nurseries are having to look for other ways of raising funding, including charging for meals—I have heard about all sorts of things, such as taking in ironing, or baking and selling cakes—indicates that insufficient funding is coming to nurseries full stop, and that that should be the starting point for dealing with this issue?

Chris Green: I am very sympathetic to that view. Fundraising by nurseries or other organisations does have a positive aspect for those organisations, but I am very sympathetic to the view that councils have been squeezed, and it is challenging for councils to pass on as much of that money as they would like.

Barbara Keeley (Worsley and Eccles South) (Lab): I congratulate the hon. Gentleman on securing the debate. He is raising some important points about top-up fees and business rates, and their effect on nurseries’ finances. I should say that we are fighting to keep five outstanding local authority nurseries open in Salford, not far from Bolton. They have been put at risk because the Government have changed the way they fund early years provision, leaving our cash-strapped Salford council to find £1.5 million this year. He has outlined how he values nurseries, so does he agree that we should not be in the position of losing any outstanding nurseries? I am sure he would not want to lose five nurseries in his constituency. Will he join me in urging the Minister to help Salford and other authorities whose nurseries are now under threat?

Chris Green: The hon. Lady and I share a common position. We ought not to be losing any provision, and certainly not the outstanding provision in her constituency. I welcome the Government’s consultation, because it recognises that when new schemes come along, with the pressures on councils, we have to reconsider the ongoing funding and support. The Minister might be able to answer the hon. Lady’s question in that regard.

There is also concern about the ratio of children to carers and about when the bands kick in. Some nurseries have mentioned that perhaps there could be adjustments. It is a complicated subject, so I will not go into the details, but I simply raise that as a concern. Will my hon. Friend the Minister also look at best practice across European countries to see what they do and what works there?

There is a sense that perhaps there is not sufficient flexibility within the system beyond the rigid bands that are set out. I will read out one of the responses to my survey to give a slight sense of the feeling:

“I feel that a professional should be able to decide what ratio would be required depending on the children in each room as well as the level of qualification of staff etcetera.”

There is a sense that if there are talented, experienced and well qualified staff, the ratio needed for a certain group of children might be different from that for a more challenging group of children with staff who are not as well qualified and not as experienced. A little more flexibility might perhaps be considered.

Sometimes a nursery cannot take a child when the family request it at the last minute, because all the age groups are at their limit. Perhaps one parent does not normally go into the office on a Friday, but there is a big project at work and they are required to attend, and the nursery has no space or cannot hire a member of staff just for the one additional child for that day. Because of the way the rules are applied, the nursery does not feel that it can say, “Okay, for this one day we will allow a little flexibility.” Perhaps that could be recognised and allowed within the system, because at the moment some nurseries say that they cannot take a child in those circumstances which causes a problem for the child, for the parents and for the place of work. Could that be resolved with a little flexibility? It would have to be monitored so there was no abuse of the system, but I think it would help all parties concerned. Of course we want transparency, but sometimes there is a conflict between ticking the boxes and trusting the professionals to run a service. We need a slightly better balance between the two.

I want to make the point that nurseries are not right for all children and all families. We ought to recognise that in families where one parent chooses to stay at home to raise the children, it is a wonderful, positive thing, but sometimes parents feel they are being told they are making the wrong decision because they have only one income and they are taxed to support other people who have two incomes. It is almost as though the state tells them that they are doing the wrong thing and they should have someone else look after their children and go off to work.

I am pleased that the Minister is having a consultation, and I have some points that I wish him to address in his speech later. My first point is on the hourly rate of support within the 30 hours. If the entire cost of childcare is not covered, families and nurseries ought to be clear that the childcare support is not free and should be seen more as a contribution towards childcare. Following the example in Scotland and what will soon be the example in Wales, there should be an exemption from business rates for nurseries and equality between independent nurseries and those associated with schools. They should all pay VAT or all be exempt.

9.45 am

Rachael Maskell (York Central) (Lab/Co-op): It is good to see you in the Chair, Mr Gapes, for such an important debate. I thank the hon. Member for Bolton West (Chris Green) for opening the debate so concisely and for raising many important issues.

First, I must declare an interest. My sister is an early years specialist and a teacher in a nursery, and she lobbies me every day about the sector, but in positive ways. She talks about how it should be reformed, improved, invested in and supported. There are fantastic examples in Scandinavian countries of the level of investment in early years. We are talking not about running a service on a shoestring, but about investing in young lives and making sure youngsters have the best start in life. That is what this debate is really about: ensuring that we put excellence right at the heart of early years. We need only look at the WAVE Trust’s work on “The 1001 Critical Days” to understand the importance of bringing that work into nurseries and then into early years education.

I have been working with the National Day Nurseries Association, and in the summer we met providers in my constituency. That is significant for the Minister because York was the first whole authority pilot for the new
funding formula and the new system around early years. Not only the statutory sector but the voluntary and private sectors in York bring to bear the real-life experience of the impact of the pilot, so I want to reflect on that today. Of course, I am also here to problem-solve, so I trust that, between us, we will be able to find some solutions to the challenges.

We are talking not only about education for youngsters, but about the whole life experience—the holistic experience—for young people. I was reminded of the increasing need around language and communication skills that young people need, not least because children are often more screen-fed these days. We need to make sure that we have holistic services, which is where Sure Start and children’s centres came in in early years, and we need to make sure we do not lose that approach. With the Budget coming up and the announcement that austerity is at an end, I am sure the Minister will walk through an open door in making sure that we have the resources we need.

Let me go back to York, the early implementer. Talking to providers right across the spectrum, it is clear that serious financial stress is being placed on nurseries. The dedication of the sector and the creativity of people running businesses make the system work, which is what we would expect of professionals. They want the system to provide good, safe services that benefit children and make sure they have the best start in life. York did a lot of preparation through the pilot to ensure business sustainability, and it put business planning support in place for nurseries, which has helped with sustainability in these challenging times of not having the necessary resources. York has also set up a shared foundation partnership, a model where providers come together to talk about the challenges they face and to try to find solutions between them, often signposting families to providers that perhaps have some spare capacity.

However, right across the board, local authorities, private providers and voluntary sector providers are saying that the money is not enough. I want the Minister to understand that. Between £1 and £2 more per hour is needed. The National Day Nurseries Association says that we are £1.90 an hour short. Obviously we need to listen to that evidence base as we move forward.

Financial viability issues are putting real pressure on the sector. Of course, that has been increased by the national living wage coming in, minimum wage costs and auto-enrolment around pension contributions, particularly for providers that want to provide better pensions. We heard about business rates. A nursery provider in my constituency has two nurseries and has paid an increase in business rates of £11,000. That was just the increase. That in itself spells out the real pressure being put on nurseries, which of course still want to provide the best possible service.

In York we have a real challenge around the high cost of living, which means that recruitment and retention is an issue. Of course, when new staff are recruited, they have to go through mandatory training, and in York we want to provide good continuous professional development for staff as well. Often it is the higher paid, more qualified staff who are leaving the sector because of the pressures being put on, for instance, teachers and other professionals. The cost of training and upskilling is therefore also having a negative impact on those providing services.

We need to heed what the NDNA is saying regarding resources, and the Treasury Committee has highlighted how the data the Government used to cost affordability—the amount of money going to the programme—was old data. We therefore need to ensure that affordability is calculated in real time, addressing the real issues that nurseries face today.

We heard examples of how nurseries are being creative to get money, because they obviously need to maintain staffing levels and ensure that children have the best engaged education. We are talking often about £15 to £25 being raised per day. We heard the example of people charging over and above for lunches so that additional money can pay for resources, activities and equipment. Some of the money is going just towards basic staffing costs. This is about getting the essentials right and charging parents for it. So the offer is certainly not free—we need to clarify that—but we want it to be, and that is clearly Labour’s policy. I trust that the Government will step up to the plate.

Other nurseries are restricting the number of children who can be in receipt of the 30 days, or restricting the number of hours available, to ensure that they can balance the books. They are telling me that they now cannot afford to update things such as equipment that is getting old and tatty or other resources. That has a negative impact on a child’s growth and learning. It is important to note that, although we have an excellent education system in York, there is an attainment gap in areas of deprivation. The system is driving greater inequality, and there is concern about that. We are trying to address those issues, and take on board the impact that they are having on young lives.

Nurseries with children who have special educational needs and disabilities wanted me to highlight the impact that the situation is having on them. There is a lack of funding specifically for those children, particularly if they do not have a statement in place. It is also about provision. Often one parent will not work; they will stay at home and be the carer for the child. They therefore do not qualify for the additional hours, because both parents need to work. Alternatively, a single parent could be at home caring for that child, and would therefore be excluded. I ask that that rule is changed as well.

We need to ensure that we are not providing the minimum, but going for the best within the amount of investment we are putting into early years. The costs to the state of getting it wrong are enormous later on in life. We are paying for that now because things have not been put in place right through the education system. Let us put the investment where it really makes a difference.

Barbara Keeley: My hon. Friend has just introduced something that ties in with the situation in Salford that I outlined: the impact that our nurseries have on families of children with special educational needs. She also made a point earlier about language and communication. We are potentially losing £1.5 million out of the £3 million cost of running our five nurseries. However, the key point she raises is about the impact, if we cannot save them, that will have later on education. Parents
have told me just how much those nurseries are doing for families with children who have special educational needs.

Rachael Maskell: I thank my hon. Friend for that point. We really have to put the right investment in place for children with special educational needs. We need to give those children the start in life that any other child should expect. We also need to support parents. Parents do an amazing job looking after their children. Having the support of a nursery helps them in their work as well. It is vital that they are not excluded from the so-called “free” offer and that a new exemption is introduced by the Minister. I would be really interested to hear him commit to that today.

We mentioned business costs, which are important. We have heard that nurseries in Wales and Scotland are exempt from business rates. We trust that that can be introduced in England. That would make such a difference to nurseries. Nurseries based in schools and childminders and domestic child carers do not pay business rates, so why do nurseries have to? We also heard about VAT, where we need a level playing field.

The Minister has a real opportunity to reform the funding. York is the example to call on. Those working in the sector have shown dedication, but they are really struggling, and the viability of nurseries, as I saw when visiting them across my constituency this summer, is very fragile indeed. There is a real plea, which is the basis of today’s debate, for the Minister to go back and get the funding that is required. Otherwise, many nurseries could disappear, and that would jeopardise early years altogether.

9.57 am

Mark Pawsey (Rugby) (Con): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Mr Gapes. I congratulate my hon. Friend for that point. We really have to put the right investment in place for children with special educational needs. We need to give those children the start in life that any other child should expect. We also need to support parents. Parents do an amazing job looking after their children. Having the support of a nursery helps them in their work as well. It is vital that they are not excluded from the so-called “free” offer and that a new exemption is introduced by the Minister. I would be really interested to hear him commit to that today.

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The Minister has a real opportunity to reform the funding. York is the example to call on. Those working in the sector have shown dedication, but they are really struggling, and the viability of nurseries, as I saw when visiting them across my constituency this summer, is very fragile indeed. There is a real plea, which is the basis of today’s debate, for the Minister to go back and get the funding that is required. Otherwise, many nurseries could disappear, and that would jeopardise early years altogether.

My interest in the sector arose as a consequence of an invitation to visit Pathfinders Day Nursery in my constituency, which is based at Crescent School in Rugby, to discuss the challenges faced by the sector with Alison Dyke, the owner of the nursery and the Warwickshire chair of the National Day Nurseries Association. My interest was aroused partly because I know about the importance of providing 30 hours of quality childcare and nursery education to our youngsters to give them a great start in life and to parents, particularly because it enables those parents who want to get back into the workforce to do so.

My interest was also aroused as a businessman. I was a businessman for 25 years, and some of the issues that were drawn to my attention related to the sustainability and viability of a fast-growing small business sector. I wanted to understand the business implications. A great deal of what I learned at my meeting related to funding, which earlier speakers mentioned.

As a fellow Warwickshire MP, the Minister will be aware that there is variation in the amount of funding that different authorities receive. The national headline funding rate is £4.94 per hour, but as the county authority, Warwickshire receives £4.30 an hour. I had assumed that that meant £4.30 an hour paid to the childcare provider. That, of course, is not the case, because local authorities are entitled to take a deduction. In Warwickshire, that deduction amounts to 5%, which is used by the local authority to fund the early years special educational needs team, to provide some business support and to contribute to the early years provider. That results in a rate of £3.96 being paid to childcare providers in Warwickshire, which Alison tells me is really not enough to provide high-quality childcare or anything more than a bare bones service.

As the Minister will be aware, there is research to support that contention: Ceeda has found that the hourly cost to a provider of each place for a three or four-year-old is £5.08, whereas the average Government funding is £4.34 an hour and Warwickshire pays its providers £3.96 per hour. Ceeda calculates that that shortfall of about £1 an hour adds up to an annual funding shortfall of £63 million for the 30 hours offer for three and four-year-olds nationwide.

The National Day Nurseries Association has found that since 2017, when the 30 hours policy was introduced, closures have increased by 47%, largely as a consequence of financial pressures. It has also found that 19% of nurseries expect to make a loss, while only 43% anticipate a profit or surplus. I have already mentioned the difference between the costs of delivering the service and of funding it. Survey respondents highlighted administration challenges in the sector: 85% said that there is now additional administration to do, while 58% said that managing the complexity of the system is among the challenges they face.

Mrs Dyke is delighted that some parents are now able to access funding and provide a nursery education for their children in a way that they could not before. She and Pathfinders are very proud of the high-quality environment that they offer to children between the ages of six months and five years. They allocate 28 places for three and four-year-olds who receive the extended 30 hours’ funding. Her assessment is that children who attend nursery make extremely good progress in their development and gain an enormous advantage, but she is concerned about how to fund it—I understand that the rate has now been frozen until 2020, despite the increasing costs of labour, staff training and service provision. She is also concerned that for children on the 30-hour funded places, providers are being required to provide a no-frills service, which does not equate to quality childcare.

My hon. Friend the Member for Bolton West referred to the fact that many providers are asking parents to pay for additional services; Mrs Dyke highlights snacks and other food, as well as other consumables and specialist sessions.

Chris Green: There is also an additional cost for those parents who need 40 hours of childcare and have to pay a separate rate for it. They may not have a higher income—they may still be on a very low wage—yet they may be subsidising additional hours for other parents who are on the 30 hours.

Mark Pawsey: That is exactly my constituent’s point: there is a differential, and those on the higher rate are effectively subsidising those on the Government-funded rate. A further problem that Mrs Dyke identifies is that
parents are not obliged to pay for the additional services. If all parents refused to pay it, more businesses would become unsustainable, quality would be compromised and providers would have to either stop offering the 30 hours or shut down completely. At a time when we are working hard to extend provision to more and more children, that is a matter of concern.

I know that the Minister is aware of Mrs Dyke’s concerns, because I wrote to him about them and he was kind enough to send a prompt reply, which I have passed on to her. I look forward to his speech; I hope that he will share some early indications of the results of the Department’s evaluations and that we will continue to push forward and develop this very important sector.

10.5 am

Julie Cooper (Burnley) (Lab): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Mr Gapes. I am grateful to the hon. Member for Bolton West (Chris Green) for securing this debate on a really important subject. I will not make a lengthy speech, but I would like to follow up on a few of his points, to which I listened with great interest.

I appreciate and fully support the hon. Gentleman’s comments about the value of the nursery sector to working parents and the importance of its availability, but I will focus on its value to children, particularly those from deprived communities. Worryingly, extensive research shows that as many as 35% of children arrive at school with language skills that are inadequate or below the level expected of their age group. It is important that we distinguish between childcare and the educational value of this excellent sector; Ofsted judges more than 90% of providers as outstanding in providing exceptional value of this excellent sector; Ofsted judges more than 90% of providers as outstanding in providing exceptional support for children’s development. For children in deprived communities, that is often a lifeline for the entire family.

When parents have so many life challenges to deal with, the daily support of qualified professionals can make the difference between getting by and not getting by, and can be crucial to children’s life chances. Highly qualified and well-trained staff can often pick up developmental issues, mental health stresses and strains, or special educational needs. They can nip problems in the bud and search out specialist help at a very early stage, which has an impact further down the line. Extensive Oxford University research has shown the value of investing in early years.

I understand that organisations in the sector have business costs, but I would prefer that we saw them as an educational service for children in their early years—a national priority. The current funding arrangements are complex and extremely fragmented, and many nurseries and nursery schools are in danger of closure. I fully understand the pressures on local government; my local authority has endured nearly 60% of cuts to its funding. However, what I seek from the Minister today is recognition that early years should be part of the Government’s plan to increase social mobility and educational attainment and to enhance our economic opportunity as a nation by ensuring that every child can contribute.

I hope that the Minister is listening and that he will try to change the focus—and maybe the Prime Minister’s mind. Instead of focusing on the impact of things like grammar schools, let us get investment into the early years where it will make the real difference. Education does not begin at 11; it begins in the early years. If we invest in children and ensure that they have that opportunity in their early days, they will reap the benefits tenfold in their later educational life. I dare say that we will all benefit from that.

10.9 am

Rushanara Ali (Bethnal Green and Bow) (Lab): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Mr Gapes, and I congratulate the hon. Member for Bolton West (Chris Green) on securing the debate. As we have heard, our nurseries play a vital role in children’s development and in preparing them for their future education and careers; if we get it right, they play a very important role in promoting social mobility and alleviating poverty. Improving standards should be a central part of that, along with ensuring that they are properly resourced.

Since the Government introduced the new early years funding formula and the 30 hours free childcare policy in 2017, 121 nurseries in England have closed, which is a 66% increase in closures from the previous year. That is a very worrying figure when we know—from the Government’s commitment to provide 30 hours and so on—that their intention is not to see a decline in nursery provision, but that is what is happening. Of the nurseries that have closed since the policy was introduced, 71% received an hourly funding rate of less than £5 per child. A total of 44% received the lower hourly funding rate of £4.30 per child. These recent closures are affecting thousands of families. To be charitable to the Government, I believe this is an unintended consequence of a well-intentioned but flawed policy.

Although I welcome the 30 hours free childcare scheme for working families, the range, complexity and fragmentation that have been mentioned have made take-up less than desirable. Some of the things that have been introduced include the 15 free hours for disadvantaged two-year-olds, the 30 free hours for three and four-year-old children of working parents and the tax-free childcare scheme. In parallel, the childcare voucher schemes have been closed to new entrants, but no assessment has been done to see what the impact would be on those who have benefited and others who could benefit from it. That is despite requests from the Treasury Committee, which I serve on. Although the time was extended, there is still a lot further to go in looking at how childcare vouchers could be used to continue supporting families where schemes have worked well.

The funding situation is underlined by the wider concern about passing on the requirement to increase wage levels as a result of the national minimum wage, and about pension contributions and business rates. Yet, the Government have not faced up to the fact that nurseries cannot afford to pay for that without national Government support. Nor can local authorities step in any longer—again, because of the context of unprecedented funding cuts over many years to local authority budgets.

The wider context is that, in constituencies such as mine, where schools have worked in partnership with nurseries to co-finance and support them, that is no longer an option. Despite some of the changes after the general election, the school system still faces some £2 billion-worth of cuts under the so-called fair funding formula, which is nothing short of a disgrace and is
certainly not fair to constituents such as mine, who have seen a massive cut in school funding. Those options, which have been a huge help in protecting nurseries in constituencies such as mine, are no longer available.

The number of free places for disadvantaged two-year-olds and children with special educational needs and disabilities—something I know the Minister cares deeply about, given his brief—is falling because those children are more expensive to care for due to the higher staff-to-child ratios. The Government have not taken that on board; if they did, they would recognise the important contribution that nurseries working with SEND children make in our constituencies. Two-year-olds are currently not eligible for support from the disability access fund, the early years pupil premium or the SEN inclusion fund, all of which could be used to improve their access to early years provision.

After campaigns and petitions—one petition received over 10,000 signatures—the Government committed in the 2017 early years national funding formula to continue the level of funding for maintained nursery schools until 2019-20 through a supplementary grant of £59 million per year, but there are no guarantees that this will continue after 2020. Our maintained nurseries are left unable to plan and are, as Members will hear shortly, facing closure in some cases. It would represent a 31% cut if there is no continuity of funding, so I hope the Minister will say today what he is going to do post 2020 and whether he is extensively lobbying the Chancellor ahead of his statement to try to address this major problem, because the specialist support that is provided to maintained nurseries is vital if we want to address the specific needs of the children who desperately need that provision.

Maintained nurseries are vital services, and they completely transform lives. I have seen that when visiting nurseries, meeting children and parents across my constituency, and meeting outstanding professionals who work really hard with very little remuneration because they believe in our children and in giving them a good future. Some 64% of maintained nursery schools are in the 30 most deprived areas of England; 63% are graded outstanding by Ofsted because of the quality of education they offer. When Ministers talk about cost savings, they should not use such blunt instruments, which do not take into account the way professionals and families have worked to improve achievement from an early age, creating the building blocks for success in later life.

In those nurseries, admissions policies prioritise children who are in greatest need and provide a high number of places for disadvantaged and SEND children, particularly those with the most complex needs. These children make great progress through the education system, which they would not do otherwise. The average number of available childcare places in areas of disadvantage has fallen from 33 children per 100 in 2016 to just 25 per 100 in 2018. That is a worrying trend, which the Government need to reverse. Across the UK, there are now over 500 fewer Sure Start centres than there were in 2010, so the wider support structure has also crumbled, at a time when families are facing huge pressure, uncertainty and insecurity. That is one area of vital provision that needs protecting.

The child poverty rate in my constituency is the highest in the country, and yet our education system has been transformed over the past 20 years; early years and maintained nurseries have played a critical role in that. We also face funding cuts of 24% from 2010 to 20, and the local authority will have to make a further £58 million-worth of savings because of the national Government cuts. In that context, unfortunately, the local authority can no longer co-finance and meet the shortfall of a number of maintained nurseries in my constituency. I am deeply concerned about that, because it was announced this September that three out of six were to be closed. We simply cannot afford for that to happen, but the local authority no longer has the bandwidth to be able to continue to finance them.

Nurseries such as Overland, Mary Sambrook and John Smith have made huge differences to children’s lives. For example, the Overland children’s centre provides specialist care services for deaf children. Parents are extremely anxious about what is going to happen in the future, and they are particularly concerned about other children who could have benefited from those nurseries but who will no longer be able to.

I hope the Minister will heed the warnings of a cross-party group of more than 70 Members of Parliament, including 12 from his own party, who called on the Government to think again about the funding that is available for this important service. I also hope he will heed the Treasury Committee’s report, which recommended that the Government ensure that the costs that are being passed on through the national minimum wage, pension contributions and business rates are borne by national Government. Otherwise, nurseries will have no option but to charge—some have started to do so, making a mockery of the policy of 30 or 15 hours of free childcare—or, as the Minister is aware, to close.

The Treasury Committee also called on the Government to look closely at why take-up is so low. At the time, it was 90% lower than initially expected. We highlighted the importance of targeting disadvantaged people, because the new arrangements do not seem to be reaching those communities and families.

Cutting back higher quality staff and changing the services that were previously free may undermine the Government’s overarching policy objective of supporting those who live in disadvantaged areas, including constituencies such as mine and those of many other Members of Parliament. I hope the Minister will redouble his efforts to persuade the Chancellor to do more to finance this important sector, which is vital to the future of our children and our country.

10.21 am

Tracy Brabin (Batley and Spen) (Lab/Co-op): It is an honour to serve under your chairmanship, Mr Gapes. I thank the hon. Member for Bolton West (Chris Green) for securing this important debate. It has been absolutely fantastic to hear so many contributions from Members across the House.

I pay tribute to the hon. Members for Bolton West and for Rugby (Mark Pawsey), who are obviously listening to MPs and are very much connected with their communities. The survey that the hon. Member for Bolton West instigated was a great tool for getting to the nitty-gritty of what is going on in his community. He talked about...
business rates, about primary schools that cannot get their VAT back when non-school nurseries can, and about wages—which I am sure the Minister will want to look into. Given the way the world works now, we need flexibility more than ever. The hon. Member for Rugby talked about the stark costs and the shortfall of £1 an hour in his community, and asked how nurseries can keep going with that shortfall.

My hon. Friend the Member for Burnley (Julie Cooper) has worked very hard with the maintained nursery sector in her area—in fact, I visited a group of nurseries in her community. She said that they are a lifeline for many families. She made a powerful argument, and she is a massive advocate for her community.

I am so grateful that my hon. Friend the Member for York Central (Rachael Maskell) made a contribution, because she was an early implementer and was at the coalface of the roll-out, so she has seen the effects of the funding shortfall. I am glad that she mentioned Sure Start and SEND provision, which are vital parts of our offer for families. I congratulate her sister, who is working very hard in the sector.

My hon. Friend the Member for Worsley and Eccles South (Barbara Keeley), who is no longer in her place, made a powerful intervention about losing five outstanding nurseries, and she talked about the prospects for SEND children. My hon. Friend the Member for Bethnal Green and Bow (Rushanara Ali) has done incredible work in her community, where the school for deaf children potentially faces closure. Her work on the Treasury Committee was really helpful a few months ago in helping us to understand the landscape in more detail, and it gave us a granular understanding of the funding shortfall. I congratulate her on her work and on the way she has supported her community. It is a pleasure to follow so many fantastic contributions.

The Minister and I have discussed the financial sustainability of the early years sector many times in the Chambers of this House. Our discussions have focused on the funding levels the Government set for their schemes. As hon. Members are aware, Government-funded childcare schemes have become an increasingly large part of early years settings’ incomes in recent years. The biggest single change was arguably the introduction of the 30 hours offer and/or underfunding. I am sure every hon. Member in the Chamber will have visited nurseries in their constituencies and seen the passion, talent and commitment of practitioners. I hope we can agree that the low pay is a scandal.

Margins in the sector are always tight, and we see a considerable churn of providers. However, I am extremely concerned by some of the recent research. For example, the Pre-school Learning Alliance survey of more than 1,600 early years practitioners in September found that eight in 10 said that it would have a somewhat or a significant negative effect on them if their funding rate stayed the same next year. Half of providers have increased their fees because of the 30 hours offer. Four in 10—42%—have introduced or increased charges for additional goods and services, and, incredibly, four in 10 say that there is a chance that they will have to close their setting in the next academic year due to the 30 hours offer and/or underfunding.

The early years sector is in a precarious financial position and is one of the lowest-paid sectors in our economy. I am sure every hon. Member in the Chamber will have visited nurseries in their constituencies and seen the passion, talent and commitment of practitioners. I hope we can agree that the low pay is a scandal. Margins in the sector are always tight, and we see a considerable churn of providers. However, I am extremely concerned by some of the recent research. For example, the Pre-school Learning Alliance survey of more than 1,600 early years practitioners in September found that eight in 10 said that it would have a somewhat or a significant negative effect on them if their funding rate stayed the same next year. Half of providers have increased their fees because of the 30 hours offer. Four in 10—42%—have introduced or increased charges for additional goods and services, and, incredibly, four in 10 say that there is a chance that they will have to close their setting in the next academic year due to the 30 hours offer and/or underfunding.

That survey is not a one-off. The National Day Nurseries Association unearthed a yearly funding shortfall of £2,166 per three and four-year-old child. That has contributed to a 66% rise in nursery closures over the past 12 months—a loss of a staggering 5,000 places. A Department for Education-commissioned report conducted by Frontier Economics, released last month, found that 25% of providers had moved from making a profit to breaking even or making a loss.

Despite the weight of evidence clearly showing that there is an urgent need for a funding increase for early years policies, the Government remain defiant. Later today, “Save Our Nurseries” campaigners will be outside Parliament, and campaigns are springing up in Salford, Birmingham, Tower Hamlets, Burnley and elsewhere, but for too many there is nothing to be saved. Bright Beginnings in Stockport said that “the reality is that we can’t provide outstanding nursery care on the funding provided.”

The Ark Nursery in West Sussex is closing because of a decade of underfunding. Windermill, in my own constituency, where I grew up, closed its doors a few months ago because of funding pressures. It seems that at least once a week, I hear of another outstanding nursery closing its doors for good.

What is to be done? Well, the Budget is coming up this month, and I wonder whether the Minister could enlighten us as to whether he or the Secretary of State...
have held conversations with the Chancellor about a funding increase for free childcare. In recent days, a petition calling for a review of how business rates are applied to nurseries has reached 10,000 signatures. Perhaps the Minister could let us know his thoughts on that, and whether he supports the decision in Wales to scrap business rates for nurseries.

Maintained nurseries remain concerned that there has been no commitment to extra funding, considering the extra costs that they incur. With budgets requiring sign-off two years in advance, can the Minister tell us when a decision will be made? As the Government occupy a larger role in the funding of nurseries, they must also face up to their responsibility to nurture the sector. If we continue on our current trajectory, we will see a growing recruitment crisis and an exodus of experienced and outstanding providers. Nobody wants that. I look forward to hearing what plans the Minister has to halt this growing problem.

10.31 am

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Education (Nadhim Zahawi): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Mr Gapes. I congratulate my hon. Friend the Member for Bolton West (Chris Green) on a very thoughtful speech and on securing this important debate.

We have heard some important contributions from both sides of the House, and I am genuinely grateful for the opportunity to set out both the Government’s position on childcare support and our priority of ensuring that hard-working parents are able to access high-quality provision.

Evidence suggests that high-quality childcare supports children’s development, as many colleagues have said, and prepares young children for school. Affordable and convenient childcare gives parents the ability to balance work and family life, allowing them to enjoy the benefits of a job, safe in the knowledge that their children are in good hands. That is why—I am very proud of this fact—this Government are investing more in childcare than any other Government. By 2019-20, we will be spending around £6 billion a year on childcare support. That includes an extra £1 billion a year to deliver 30 hours of free childcare and pay our higher funding rates.

The Secretary of State and I announced that we have committed a further £30 million of capital funding to build more school-based nursery places in the most deprived areas. That supports our commitment to social mobility, ensuring that we provide more quality places for those that will benefit the most. We are also providing additional funding, worth around £60 million per year, to support maintained nursery schools at least until 2019-20. Time permitting, I will return to maintained nurseries in response to some of the comments from colleagues.

All three and four-year-olds, along with disadvantaged two-year-olds, are able to access 15 hours a week of free early education. We have just celebrated the first year since doubling the childcare entitlement for working parents of three and four-year-olds to 30 hours a week. The childcare service, which is the online application for 30 hours of free childcare, along with the information available through the Childcare Choices website and the childcare calculator, have helped 340,000 children to take advantage of more high-quality childcare and put savings of up to £5,000 back in their parents’ pockets. That is something to be celebrated.

The recent independent evaluation of the 30 hours free childcare found that over a quarter of parents reported that they had increased their working hours, and 15% of parents said they would not be working without the extended hours. One parent interviewed for the evaluation also noted the wider benefits, which sometimes go unnoticed, of being able to work more:

“By doing four days now instead of three...my company looks at my development and progression in a way that they wouldn’t if I was only doing three days”.

That is great news which genuinely demonstrates the real and valuable impact of 30 hours. At a celebration, I met one parent who came up to me and said, “I just want to thank you for this. We are not the poorest family in the country, but we are certainly not rich. The 30 hours have allowed my wife to retrain in accountancy and she has got a job in that sector.” Those are real lives that are being impacted by a policy that is truly delivering on the ground.

Rushanara Ali: Will the Minister give way?

Nadhim Zahawi: I have so many things to say. The hon. Lady made a thoughtful speech, and I will try to get through as many of the questions asked by her and other colleagues as possible. I hope she will forgive me for not giving way.

In this research, parents also reported wider benefits for their families: a fantastic 86% thought that their child was better prepared for school, and 79% felt that their family’s quality of life had improved. The recently published “Study of Early Education and Development” report evidenced the beneficial impacts of high-quality early education for all children aged two to four on both cognitive and socio-emotional development at the age of four.

The introduction of 30 hours has been a large-scale transformational programme, and change can be challenging for everyone. But we have seen tens of thousands of providers respond magnificently—I want to thank them for that—because of their ongoing commitment to helping families. The evaluation of 30 hours found that three quarters of providers were willing and able to deliver the extended hours, with no negative impacts on their provision or on sufficiency of childcare places. As we have heard from colleagues’ local experiences, the childcare market in England consists of a diverse range of provider types, allowing parents to have choice over their childcare provider. The supply of childcare in England is generally of high quality, with strong indications that existing supply is able to meet parental demand for Government-funded entitlements.

Nearly 80,000 private childcare providers were registered with Ofsted in March this year, and we know that nearly 10,000 school-based providers offer early years childcare. While there are, of course, sad examples of providers closing—as some hon. Members have shared—there is no evidence of widespread closures in the non-domestic childcare market. [Interruption.] Well, let me share the Ofsted data if hon. Members do not believe me. The Ofsted data published in June 2018 showed that the
number of childcare places has remained stable since 2012. It is normal for providers to join and leave the Ofsted register, as it is a private market, and it can happen for a variety of reasons.

Most significantly, we have not heard via local authorities, from hon. Members or in the media of eligible parents being unable to find a 30-hours place or a place for any of the free entitlements.

**Tracy Brabin:** I am so grateful to the Minister for giving way. He says that there is no evidence of parents not being able to access the 30 hours. I have spoken to providers and nursery owners who say that they are not offering 30 hours at all.

**Nadhim Zahawi:** The hon. Lady makes an important point. It is up to providers whether they want to offer the 30 hours or not. That is a choice for them to make, but we have seen no evidence of parents being unable to find a place.

As important as the availability of a place is, I am also pleased, and in many ways delighted, that the quality of childcare providers remains high, with more than nine in 10 rated good or outstanding by Ofsted. In January 2018, over 1.2 million children under the age of five were receiving funded early education in settings rated good or outstanding by Ofsted.

We continue to support growth in the childcare sector. We have already invested £100 million in a capital fund to create extra high-quality childcare places in all provider types. We continue to work with councils to support the providers who deliver our free entitlements, through initiatives such as the £7.7 million delivery support fund and through our delivery contractor, Childcare Works.

I was not going to mention the NAO report or Frontier Economics, but I am pleased that the shadow Minister commended the thorough and wide-ranging review that the NAO report mentions—we will say a bit more about that later. Over the next year, Childcare Works will continue to work with local authorities to raise awareness and to support childcare providers to deliver the Government’s childcare entitlements, including the 30-hours offer.

The Government have introduced a range of business rate reforms and measures, which will be worth more than £10 billion by 2023—my hon. Friend the Member for Bolton West mentioned the issues to do with business rates—as raising the rateable value threshold for 100% relief from £6,000 to £12,000, which means that about 655,000 small businesses pay no business rates at all. A package of support worth £435 million over five years is available to those that have had a large hike in business rates. We are also increasing the frequency of property revaluations from every five to every three years following the next revaluation, to ensure that bills more accurately reflect property values.

We have provided powers under the Localism Act 2011 to enable local authorities to offer business rate discounts as they see fit. In 2015, my predecessor and the local government Minister asked officials to write to all councils to encourage them to use those powers to support access to local high-quality childcare provision. So far, I am aware of only two councils that have chosen to do that. Members could talk to their local authorities about joining in to do that.

On the work on costs—I want to address the issue of costs—funding is inevitably and understandably high on our agenda during any discussion about free early education entitlements. My Department continues to pay close attention to the matter. I do not want colleagues to go away with the impression that this Minister thinks funding is not a challenge. We are, however, clear that getting the funding right is critical to the successful delivery of free entitlements.

**Tracy Brabin:** Will the Minister give way?

**Nadhim Zahawi:** I am coming on to something the hon. Lady raised, but I shall give way happily if I have time at the end.

This year, we shall be enhancing our annual survey of childcare and early years providers with more detailed research. Again, I commend my hon. Friend the Member for Bolton West on his research, and I am interested in getting deep into the evidence on provider finances and childcare fees for two to four-year-olds. We have also commissioned independent research that involved site visits to a representative sample of early years providers to provide us with robust, up-to-date evidence on the costs of delivering childcare, including operating costs such as business rates. That is part of our ongoing monitoring of 30-hours implementation, and we shall consider the next steps once we have the findings on costs.

I shall now turn to some of the comments made by colleagues. My hon. Friend the Member for Bolton West mentioned VAT. Under European law, registered childcare providers deliver an exempt service, which means that they do not charge VAT on their services. The exemption is obviously designed to ensure that tax does not fall on individuals using welfare services, such as nursery services. However, goods and services purchased by the providers are subject to VAT, which causes understandable frustrations in the sector, but the rules cannot be changed within the existing legal framework. There may be opportunities to make changes to the VAT system in the future, but our rights and obligations remain unchanged until negotiations on our departure from the European Union are complete.

On the point my hon. Friend and many colleagues made about nurseries going out of business, the Ofsted data in itself is interesting. It shows that the number of childcare places available has remained stable since 2012. I also remind hon. Members that childcare providers do not have to offer the free 30 hours—that is entirely up to them—although, since the roll-out of 30 hours of free childcare, we have seen a sizeable majority of providers increasing the number of free hours available to parents, with no evidence of an impact on their funding.

My hon. Friend the Member for Rugby (Mark Pawsey) and other Members mentioned the issue of nurseries charging parents. The Government have been clear that the funding is intended to deliver free high-quality, flexible childcare. It is not intended to cover the costs of meals, consumables or additional services, so providers can charge parents for such things. However, parents must not be required to pay any fee as a condition of taking up a place. Our guidelines state that providers should ensure that their charges are clear to enable parents to make an informed choice.

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A number of colleagues mentioned financial support for parents in connection with disadvantage. I remind hon. Members that, in addition to the investment that we are making, under universal credit working parents may claim back up to 85% of eligible childcare costs, compared with 70% of costs covered under the outgoing tax credits system.

The hon. Member for Bethnal Green and Bow (Rushanara Ali) raised another issue to do with disadvantage, pointing out that two-year-olds cannot access the disability access fund, the early years pupil premium or the SEN inclusion fund. In 2017, we increased the funding rates for all disadvantaged two-year-olds by 7%, and we pay a higher rate for them because we recognise the higher costs associated with two-year-olds. The two-year-old funding is, by its nature, already targeted to the disadvantaged in that age group.

Rushanara Ali: Will the Minister give way?

Nadhim Zahawi: I shall give way later if I have time. The hon. Lady and the hon. Member for Burnley (Julie Cooper) mentioned maintained nurseries. The Secretary of State and I have both seen the incredible work that maintained nurseries deliver for their communities, and we have made £60 million a year of supplementary funding available at least until 2020. My message to local authorities is: do not take premature decisions on maintained nurseries. Many colleagues have made representations to me about the quality of maintained nurseries in their constituencies.

The hon. Member for Worsley and Eccles South (Barbara Keeley), who is no longer present, spoke about nurseries in Salford being forced to close as a result of funding rules. I met the hon. Lady and other colleagues to discuss the matter, but it is for the council to manage its local markets and to ensure appropriate provision for children with special educational need and/or disability. Councils may request exemption from the high pass-through rule, but Salford chose not to do that. My officials continue to discuss the matter with council officers. I am pleased that there are no 30-hour sufficiency issues in Salford.

The hon. Member for York Central (Rachael Maskell) made a strong speech about the early years workforce and professional development. As she said, staff training and development is associated with quality, and I have announced that we are investing £20 million in professional development and training for practitioners in disadvantaged areas of our country.

The attainment gap was mentioned by the hon. Members for York Central and for Burnley. I would say that we were in agreement. More than a quarter of children were in agreement. More than a quarter of children finished their reception year still without the early communication and reading skills that they need to thrive. The Government have ambitious plans to halve the number over the next 10 years. I really hope that he appreciates just how serious this matter is and that the Government should not make premature decisions on maintained nurseries.

Rushanara Ali: Will the Minister give way?

Nadhim Zahawi: I think I have enough time, although my hon. Friend is allowed a few minutes to conclude the debate.

Rushanara Ali: I was particularly heartened by the Minister saying that local authorities should not make premature decisions about closing maintained nurseries. Will he say a little more about that? If he cannot now, will he write to me? My nurseries face imminent closure. Will he say a little more about that? If he cannot now,
Secretary of State and I have been around the country looking at the great work that maintained nurseries deliver to the most disadvantaged parents in our country. I am happy to write to the hon. Lady to repeat that message so that she may share it with her local authority.

I am grateful for your patience, Mr Gapes, and to colleagues for their contributions.

10.53 am

Chris Green: From London to York, stopping at Rugby, Salford and Burnley along the way, there has been broad consensus, captured by the hon. Member for Batley and Spen (Tracy Brabin), that there is increasing pressure on the system that is challenging the sustainability of the nursery sector. Some nurseries have closed; in my constituency others feel under threat and are eating into their reserves. I welcome the Minister’s comments; I know he will take away our concerns. I was surprised there was a Brexit angle in this debate—it seems to get everywhere. I hope he will take every opportunity with the Chancellor in the run-up to the Budget.

Question put and agreed to.

That this House has considered the sustainability of the nursery sector.

10.54 am

Sitting suspended.

Central Heating Installations: Consumer Protection

10.57 am

Jamie Stone (Caithness, Sutherland and Easter Ross) (LD): I beg to move,

That this House has considered consumer protections for new central heating installations.

As ever, it is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Mr Gapes. I am extremely glad to have discovered just seconds ago that I do not need to sum up at the end of the debate. Being relatively new to this place, I suddenly had kittens at the thought that I might have completely misunderstood parliamentary procedure, but I think I may have got it right.

The very first time that what I regard as a fairly serious issue crossed my radar was shortly after my mother died. I may be called sentimental by many but I decided that it would be too sad for my mother’s old telephone number, which she had all her life, to go to some anonymous BT file. For that reason, three years ago I thought that I would ask for my telephone number to be deleted, so I could take on my mother’s old telephone number. That was when the trouble started. Why do the calls always seem to come at 5 o’clock in the afternoon? That is my impression, at least. They go, “Hello. If you’re a pensioner or on benefits, you will be very interested to know of a central heating scheme for which you could be eligible.” If I had a penny for each of those telephone calls, I would have a few quid by now.

There is nothing inherently wrong at all with the idea of people in need receiving new, efficient central heating systems, paid for by either a Government grant or a levy scheme from a large utility company. The good intention behind the scheme cannot be faulted; after all, it is simply about making those in need warm and able to afford the cost of being warm. However, the trouble comes because the recipient of the new central heating system has not paid for it directly themselves.

The Consumer Contracts (Information, Cancellation and Additional Charges) Regulations 2013 do not apply. Those regulations contain detailed and pretty stringent requirements of businesses that sell goods and services off-premises—that is, door to door. They require consumers to be given detailed paperwork, and give them the right to a cooling-off period. In fairness, other consumer laws apply, but I must tell Members, as an MP and a citizen, that making them actually bite can prove a real challenge. I do not want to go into the detail of that in the short time I have, but I am pretty sure that every Member will have some experience of that issue.

I return to the issue of people being called and asked whether they would like a new boiler and heating system. Sadly, all too often we hear stories about cowboy installations. In some cases the heating system is defective, and getting it put right can prove nearly impossible for the household involved.

Patricia Gibson (North Ayrshire and Arran) (SNP): Related to the matters the hon. Gentleman raises, many people across the UK—certainly in Scotland—fell victim to the Home Energy and Lifestyle Management Systems green energy scandal. Customers have been left feeling very let down and are pleading with the UK Government
to intervene directly to assist them out of the mess they found themselves in after that company cold-called them, went into liquidation and left them high and dry.

*Jamie Stone:* The hon. Lady makes a fair point. As a fellow Scot, I come across that kind of case all too frequently, and it is a nasty example of what I am on about. I will return to the sort of regulatory scheme we might use to try to tackle it. Of course, at that point the person in trouble often turns to their MP for help, so I am pleased to have secured the debate.

I have no doubt that Her Majesty’s Government and the Minister wish to do everything they can to help sort out this issue, so I wonder whether I may make a few suggestions. The first is that there ought to be a truly independent body—it could be administered by local authorities—to assess the need for a particular household to be considered for a new central heating system.

I suggest that would achieve two things. First, it would nip in the bud the rather extraordinary situation, which I am sure my Scottish colleague will recognise, whereby virtually new boilers and heating systems are unnecessarily removed and replaced when there is no need for that to happen—the system may just have needed some mechanical tweaking to make it work better. Sadly, that happens, and it is a waste of money. Secondly, I hope that it would tackle thorny situations where there is a really old heating system—30 or 40 years old, or more—that is highly inefficient but, for reasons I know not, contractors hesitate to replace it. There is something wrong with the system in that respect. There is evidence of that, and I suggest that the Department should look at that aspect of the issue.

My second suggestion is that there should be an accreditation system for businesses that install such equipment. After all, in the building world, we have building control regulations. We all know them—they cover all manner of issues about the design and construction of a new build—everything from the steepness of a staircase to the load-bearing potential of roof trusses. The fact is that those rules work well—I think I can say that is true throughout the UK—which is why we do not have houses falling on our heads. People may get a bit irritated when building control people come out and say, “No, you’ve not done it right,” but the regulations are there for the best of reasons. It seems to me that a similar regime could be applied to heating systems purchased through grants and levies. The bottom line is that if a heating system is installed wrongly, it can, in the wrong circumstances, be dangerous and may cause a household fire.

My third and final suggestion is that there should be a cooling-off period after a householder agrees to a system being installed during which they are allowed to change their mind. Indeed, my first suggestion could kick in at that point. It should be the law that, when a household says to the person on the other end of the telephone, “Yes, I like the sound of a new central heating system,” it must be pointed out to them that that system must be run past the independent body I mentioned—to assess the need for a particular household may agree with the householder and say, “Yes, your system could do with upgrading, and this suitably accredited firm might be just the people to do it for you.”

*Patricia Gibson:* I thank the hon. Gentleman for pointing out how we could improve the situation and prevent the unfortunate experiences of our constituents, but I hope the Minister agrees that we must also try to address some of the huge injustices that my constituents and people much further afield have experienced. We are in a situation where consumers cannot sell their houses. Under the HELMS deals, consumers had solar panels fitted in good faith but found they were not in the feed-in tariff and could not register for it. They were mis-sold credit deals, they pay more for their electricity, and they are tied into payment contracts with energy suppliers for two decades. I wonder what the hon. Gentleman thinks about fixing those injustices before—

*Mike Gapes (in the Chair):* Order. I remind the hon. Lady that interventions are meant to be brief.

*Patricia Gibson:* Indeed, but I just wondered.

*Mike Gapes (in the Chair):* Yes, they will be brief—thank you. I call Jamie Stone.

*Jamie Stone:* It is a pleasure to take an intervention of that quality. The hon. Lady contributes wisely to the point I am trying to make. She is exactly right that the sale of a house can be affected.

I said that a householder, once they have said, “Yes, we like the idea of a new central heating system,” should have to go to an independent person, who should ask, “Do you really want to do this?” However, I would not want that rule to be absolute. For instance, social workers and, to an extent, NHS employees may have a good idea of which households might benefit from a Government grant or levy scheme heating system, but the householder may not feel inclined, for whatever reason, to reply to the telephone call or make an independent application. Sometimes there has to be a push from a different angle to ensure that someone gets the best deal.

Let me conclude where I started. A lot of people find the telephone calls I mentioned intrusive, but for some they are quite frightening, which many people do not need. In the case of my late mother’s telephone number, my wife is sick and tired of telling firms that my mother is no longer with us. Curiously, as an anecdote, one of our neighbours—a doctor’s widow, who is no fool whatsoever—finds that when she mentions that she is over 80 the conversation from the other end stops immediately. I have no idea why that is, and I will forgive the Minister if she does not know the reason for that curious quirk of fact.

I repeat—I give the Government credit where it is due—that the good and kindly intention of giving someone an affordable, warm home absolutely should not be underestimated. There are various marks of a civilised society, and I believe that is surely one of them. As I represent one of the coldest parts—nay, the coldest part—of the British Isles at Altnaharra, I do rather know what I am talking about on keeping houses warm.

It is a shame if a number of loopholes lead to unsatisfactory service delivery, and I suggest to the Minister that is what we want. Of course, there are good contractors who are proud of their standard of their work, and it would be a real shame, would it not, if their reputation were tarnished by the odd rotten apple?
I suggest that, sadly, that is rather the case. It is simply not fair on the firms that are trying to do their best, or on the Government, who have the best of intentions in trying to look after old people and make their lives of the highest possible quality.

Whether through a Government grant or a levy scheme, money can be used to the good of people. Getting it right and targeting the money with absolute accuracy is crucial. The electorate are not stupid. They like to see the public pound targeted for maximum effect, and they expect nothing less of government.

11.11 am

The Minister for Energy and Clean Growth (Claire Perry): It is a pleasure, as always, to serve under your chairmanship, Mr Gapes. I congratulate the hon. Member for Caithness, Sutherland and Easter Ross (Jamie Stone) on securing the debate and on approaching it in a collegiate way. He asked important questions on behalf of his belated mother—I extend my condolences to him for his loss—and raised important questions that cross the provision of better forms of central heating as well as, more broadly, telephone mis-selling and consumer rights. I feel qualified to answer some of his points but, in my summation, I will say how I will help to perhaps raise all of our understanding.

As the hon. Gentleman will know, the Government are committed to making energy bills more affordable, particularly for lower income or more vulnerable households. Of course, that involves working with industry in particular to improve both the targeting of schemes such as the one to which he referred and the process of delivering improvements in a way that benefits consumers. I will take a moment to talk about current protections and then address some of the hon. Gentleman’s excellent suggestions.

Reasonable levels of protection are in place for boiler installations. Indeed, all installations should be reported to a local authority building control, which is responsible for ensuring that such work meets building codes and regulations, not least because of safety questions. All installers of gas boilers must be on the Gas Safe Register—and, of course, they can be struck off. We have the highest energy efficiency standards for gas boiler installations of any European country, and we continue to raise those standards to ensure that consumers get the maximum heating efficiency for the minimum cost and carbon dioxide emissions. As with any other consumer contract, if consumers are dissatisfied with how the work has been delivered, they can appeal to their local citizens advice bureau or trading standards. In Scotland, people can appeal to Home Energy Scotland, which can provide free and impartial energy advice.

On the hon. Gentleman’s question about cooling-off periods, the installation of a boiler, as with any consumer contract, is subject to a cooling-off period, which I believe is 14 days. I will put that in a letter to him, which I will refer to later in my remarks.

As the hon. Gentleman noted, we also have the energy company obligation scheme to help those who are struggling with bills. Historically, that scheme has been split between helping those struggling with bill payments and reducing carbon emissions. I have decided to put as close as possible to 100% of that scheme into solving the challenge of fuel poverty, as part of the Government’s manifesto commitment to reduce the level of fuel poverty by 2035. The scheme is worth about £640 million a year—a large sum of money—and 10% of the households in the hon. Gentleman’s constituency have received measures under it, which might include electric storage heaters and oil boilers. I am sure that, like in my constituency, many of his constituents will live off the gas grid and be reliant on stand-alone heating.

The hon. Gentleman asked an important question about how we can ensure that these things are needed. I live in an off-gas-grid area in the middle of my constituency, and most weeks I go home to a flyer through my door suggesting that I apply for a new oil boiler. I do not feel that I am the target audience for these measures, and I have raised repeatedly with my team how we improve the targeting of this valuable sum of money towards those who need it most.

I hope the hon. Gentleman will be pleased to know that, in the latest iteration of ECO, we have increased the level of money that a local authority can spend with its discretion to 25%. We have also increased the level of money spent in rural areas such as those we represent to 15%, so there is now more of a local targeting element.

On the hon. Gentleman’s suggestion that local authorities should know who has been approached, I am the least likely person to want to burden our hard-pressed local officials with more reporting requirements on behalf of central Government, but the local relevance of measures, as he said, is incredibly important.

The hon. Gentleman mentioned standards. Any ECO installation must meet building regulations and British installation standards, and insulation measures must have an appropriate lifetime guarantee—even tighter measures than for general installations.

The hon. Member for North Ayrshire and Arran (Patricia Gibson) rightly raised the question of renewable heat contracts sold to constituents that had indirect payments associated with them. In June, I introduced an assignment of rights so that people trapped in such contracts can assign them to another party, which should enable them to free up their homes for sale. One of my action points from the debate is to write to her with the details of that scheme to share with her constituents.

Patricia Gibson: I thank the Minister for promising to write to me on that, because it is important to many constituents. Given that we know that HELMS exploited constituents by mis-selling a Government-backed deal and that the Government backed the company, will the UK Government undertake even to consider a review of green deal loans proposed by that company, given the high volume of loans that have a payback period exceeding 20 years?

Claire Perry: The hon. Lady is not alone in raising the challenges of mis-selling under the green deal, and I have asked my officials to look at that. The green deal—I was on its Bill Committee—was designed to unlock the issue of persuading people to improve the energy efficiency measures of their homes. Currently, all contracts are covered by existing consumer protections, but as a second action point I undertake to go away and review this specific company and write to her with the state of progress on those conversations.
[Claire Perry]

I mentioned the assignment of rights, and both hon. Members have raised the challenge of whether there should not be more trust in the system. We have a question of mis-selling, which I will address in my final remarks, but should households not be able to trust the installer phoning them up to offer what could be a valuable addition to their homes? We conducted a review called “Each Home Counts”, and one of its key recommendations was for an independent, all-encompassing mark of quality for both installation and customer service that consumers can rely on and trust. We will launch a more robust, Government-endorsed quality scheme through TrustMark.

Jamie Stone: This is a side issue to what I said earlier. Given what the Minister just said, there may be some evidence that wood pellet boilers are being proposed for households—particularly for the elderly—where that may not be the most suitable form of heating. I have heard stories of pensioners going out in the snow to shovel wood pellets.

Claire Perry: The hon. Gentleman raises an important question, and because of the changes to the renewable heat incentive, which were a driver for many domestic wood pellet installations, such things will no longer be supported. I agree, however, that we had a shortage of domestic pellets for much of the winter, and in my region we have a shortage of engineers to service those boilers. I do not suggest that people should rip those boilers out, because they play a valuable part and are supported historically under the RHI, but in future I would like homes in rural areas that are off the gas grid to be supported with things such as heat pumps and other technologies that are far less complicated and costly. That is part of the change that we are hoping to make to the RHI scheme and the energy compliance obligation going forward.

Let me return to the question of trust. We plan for all Government schemes such as the ECO to require installers to deliver those TrustMark standards. That will help drive out rogue traders—the hon. Gentleman is right to say that some traders claim falsely to be part of the Government’s scheme, when they are no such thing—and we will strongly support such measures, and encourage consumers to use only reputable traders. Consumers should be certain when they see a brand that they are dealing with a company that has the right technical competencies and is committed to customer service and the customer for the long term. The Consumer Protection Partnership has identified energy efficiency measures as a priority area, and it will be taking forward work to see how consumer detriment can be reduced in that area.

The hon. Gentleman raised other important points, which I do not feel qualified to answer, regarding the whole challenge of consumer mis-selling over the phone—that has now switched to mobile phones, since many of us decided never to answer our landlines to an unidentified number. He raised the question of rights for consumers under existing contract law, and my fellow Ministers have done good work in this area. I am afraid I am not prepared to give the hon. Gentleman the details, but I will write to him as a third action point to set those out, so he can be sure that the question of telephone mis-selling and consumer protection is being addressed.

I hope that that partially answers some of the hon. Gentleman’s excellent suggestions about independent bodies, local involvement, an accreditation system and cooling-off points. I have set out a number of actions for my team to follow up, and I thank the hon. Gentleman and the hon. Member for North Ayrshire and Arran for raising such important points on behalf of their constituents.

Question put and agreed to.

11.22 am

Sitting suspended.
Asylum Accommodation Contracts

[Mrs Anne Main in the Chair]

2.33 pm

Alex Cunningham (Stockton North) (Lab): I beg to move,

That this House has considered asylum accommodation contracts.

It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Mrs Main.

This issue might not grab the headlines of the mainstream media, it might not be a scandal that starts to trend on Twitter and it is unlikely to be an issue that party leaders are doorstepped on, but it is an issue of extreme importance. It reflects what kind of country we are and want to be, and what kind of people we are and want to be.

A huge number of areas could be addressed to improve the quality of life of asylum seekers, particularly when they are living on asylum support, from the amount of financial support they get to their general health and wellbeing. We can and should do better, and it need not cost the taxpayer any more money. Today’s debate is specifically about asylum accommodation contracts.

The Government are just weeks away from signing new contracts that will determine the quality of asylum accommodation support for the next 10 years. This is a tremendous opportunity for mostly small but significant accommodation support for the next 10 years. This is a tremendous opportunity for mostly small but significant service providers are delivering what they are supposed to and treating asylum seekers with the dignity and respect that we would expect for our own families.

Sadly, under the current contracts that is not generally the case. The total lack of adequate monitoring lets contractors get away with providing the most basic of services, which often fail to meet the old contract criteria. Brief after brief and organisation after organisation has called on the Government to step up the monitoring and to work in partnership with local authorities and third sector organisations to ensure that asylum seekers the services they are entitled to and that the British taxpayer pays for.

Mr Jim Cunningham (Coventry South) (Lab): I congratulate my hon. Friend on securing the debate. There is a pattern with these private companies in relation to public services. We have seen it in social security, where companies have actually had their contracts cancelled. More importantly, we should also touch on the Shaw report, which lays out what the Home Secretary thinks and the changes he is going to make. We must do what my hon. Friend suggests and go along with the Shaw report.

Mrs Anne Main (in the Chair): Order. The hon. Gentleman knows by now that interventions are supposed to be short.

Alex Cunningham: My hon. Friend the Member for Coventry South (Mr Cunningham) makes a fair point. That is why we have to take opportunities with the new contracts to improve on what we had in the past.

The Home Affairs Committee—I said I would mention it—recommended that the Government recognise local authorities and the third sector as key stakeholders, empower devolved Governments to monitor the delivery of the contracts and give local authorities greater flexibility to determine where accommodation is procured.

Anna Turley (Redcar) (Lab/Co-op): I appreciate my hon. Friend giving way and congratulate him on securing this debate. As my neighbour in Teesside, will he join me in congratulating the local authority there? They have proved themselves to be excellent partners in delivering the Syrian resettlement programme. Does he agree that flexibility should be extended on the asylum dispersal system, so that local authorities can again prove themselves to be excellent partners in providing these services when the private sector fails?

Alex Cunningham: Yes, I most certainly do. We have some great local authorities throughout the Tees Valley. The local authorities really want to work with the Government on this. They have the expertise, they know the people, they know the places and they know the facilities.

Chi Onwurah (Newcastle upon Tyne Central) (Lab): I thank my hon. Friend for being generous with his time. Specifically on that point about local authorities, my local authority, Newcastle City Council, recently received a court judgment that prevents it from imposing decent home standards on asylum accommodation. Does he agree that that is absolutely unacceptable?

Alex Cunningham: It is absolutely unacceptable. All the more reason why the Government can now take an opportunity with the new contracts to lay down higher standards for the vulnerable people who we should be looking after.
A briefing from the Local Government Association confirms that the current model of provision for asylum seekers does not provide the necessary funding for councils and is likely to place further pressures on specific areas of the UK. I share the view that partnership structures need to be established as a matter of urgency that allow local authorities and regions to work with the Home Office and contractors to better manage the provision.

Debbie Abrahams (Oldham East and Saddleworth) (Lab): My hon. Friend is very generous with his time. He is making a passionate speech. I want to add to the point about local authorities and community members. I have been supporting an Iraqi family who have had a real issue. The community came to me and said that the way that the family were being treated was absolutely unacceptable. In the scrutiny we need to make sure that communities are on board as well.

Alex Cunningham: That is most certainly the case. If it were not for the community organisations in my constituency and throughout the Tees valley and the country, the people who are refugees in our country would be suffering a hell of a lot more than they currently are. The current contract fails in so many ways, and the new one will also fail if it is not designed and monitored properly. We need to listen to these organisations, be they local authorities or third sector groups. Daily, they meet and work with asylum seekers; they know where the failings are and how services could be improved.

A briefing from Asylum Matters says that the Government’s asylum accommodation contracts are worth more than £4 billion. That is £4 billion of public money, but Parliament seems powerless to influence the procurement process in order to ensure that some of the most vulnerable in our society get the support that they deserve as human beings. I hope that that will change today.

I want now to take a few moments to talk about simple matters: duvets, pillows, plates and mattresses. I am appalled at the poor quality of the ones provided to asylum seekers in Stockton. The contract says to provide a duvet and pillows, and the contractors do, but it is possible to get two pillows into one pillowcase, and the duvets are so thin as to provide no warmth at all. The mattresses, too, are poor; they are uncomfortable and often dirty. Then there is the single plastic plate issued to some refugees. The contract says to provide a plate, so the contractors do, but the plates are not fit for purpose and end up stained with knife marks cut into them from the simple task of cutting up food. If it were not for the churches and charities in my area and, I am sure, elsewhere that provide better quality goods, refugees would be freezing in houses where heating is often restricted.

Paul Blomfield (Sheffield Central) (Lab): My hon. Friend mentioned the Home Affairs Committee report. The Government have said that they want to—

Mrs Anne Main (in the Chair): Order. I am sorry, but this cannot be a speech, because a lot of hon. Members are down to speak. I therefore ask for short interventions.

Alex Cunningham: I know exactly what my hon. Friend the Member for Sheffield Central (Paul Blomfield) was talking about, and I am sure that I will address some of those issues later.

Surely refugees should not have to rely on charity. I therefore ask the Minister to get into a little bit of detail and ensure that the new contracts define good tog ratings, decent pillows and—who knows?—even a plate that can be left clean for use the next day. That would be an easy and quick win that would make a tremendous difference to the lives and dignity of our refugees.

There is a tendency among some in this country and in the wider world to view someone seeking asylum as an “other”. So often it is ignored that asylum seekers are fleeing some of the most horrendous and dangerous situations, which we in this country could not even imagine. I will continue to use my voice to inform and educate and to communicate the message that asylum seekers are welcome here, that they will be treated with dignity and respect, and that they have a right to expect a quality of life that we would want for our own friends and family. I therefore stand with all those organisations that have contacted me and with asylum seekers in this country in making a plea to the Home Secretary to work in partnership with local authorities and the third sector, which can add so much value.

Dame Caroline Spelman (Meriden) (Con): I congratulate the hon. Gentleman on securing the debate. I am sure that he has spoken with Refugee Action about the enormous need that asylum seekers have to learn English. Perhaps through him, I can appeal to my right hon. Friend the Minister to talk in her reply to the debate about what can be done to increase the capacity for teaching asylum seekers English.

Alex Cunningham: That is a very strong point. Local churches including my own, the Portrack Baptist church, are running the English classes for refugees in our community, so the point is well made and I am sure that the Minister will have taken it on board.

Asylum Matters commissioned an analysis of the statement of requirements for the new asylum accommodation and support contracts in order to identify how they differ from the current COMPASS—commercial and operational managers procuring asylum support services—contracts. It found that, on the whole, the new contracts resemble the current one, with most of the alterations being made unlikely to improve significantly the service that is provided. Has the Minister seen that analysis and, if so, what does she think of it?

There is also serious concern that the contract is for 10 years without any review period built in. That is reckless and wrong. The whole approach lets the Government wash their hands of the whole issue for a
whole decade. With inadequate monitoring, many profit takers will just maximise their returns by short-changing refugees.

**Marsha De Cordova** (Battersea) (Lab): Thank you, Mr Speaker, for the debate. There is an important point here. Does he agree that it is wrong to award 10-year contracts without adequate contract compliance being in place to ensure that people meet the obligations and that basic standards are met, so that the human rights of asylum seekers are not violated?

**Alex Cunningham:** Exactly. I really look forward to hearing from the Minister how the compliance and monitoring will be improved for the new contracts.

**Alex Cunningham** (Derby North) (Lab): There are real concerns about mother-and-child accommodation. Women with two children of different ages are still all put together in one room—a situation that would never normally be accepted in the UK. Babies are particularly vulnerable to sickness in such situations, and the cramped conditions are causing disease to spread at an alarming rate, leading to everyone suffering from a sickness bug but still having to join a queue to use the bathroom down the hall. That is intolerable and even inhumane.

One of the other more emotive issues with the proposed contract has been highlighted by the Home Affairs Committee and so many other people. I am referring to asylum seekers being forced to share a bedroom, perhaps with a person of a different culture, different nationality and different religion. Often, it can be a victim of torture who is forced to share a room. Freedom from Torture has many examples that demonstrate that the Government and their contractors are failing to meet the obligations and that basic standards are set, so that the human rights of asylum seekers are not violated.

Another example involves a young Kurdish man who was moved from Teesside, where he had settled and joined a local church, to Tyneside because an older man sharing his accommodation thought that he could tell him how to live his life simply because he was his elder. The young man was intimidated, but rather than the older man being dealt with, the young man was moved, leaving the troublemaker to start on the next young person to be accommodated there.

**One of the organisations in my own patch is Justice First, and I am pleased to see Kath Sainsbury from Justice First sitting in the Public Gallery. It has stressed to me that currently the Government’s position is that a person will not have to share a room if they are determined to be “vulnerable”, yet the Government have refused to define what vulnerable means to them.**

In the reply to my parliamentary question about shared accommodation, the Minister said that room sharing will continue to be permitted “providing it complies with the strict criteria set out in the contracts and with relevant national and local housing regulations, including advice from social services and primary and secondary care bodies on whether room sharing is inappropriate.”

In addition all accommodation providers will be required to continue to ensure that they take into account a service user’s individual characteristics and provide them with appropriate accommodation reflective of any changing needs, including adherence to religious practice.”

I ask the Minister today how that will work. Will she spell out what those “strict criteria” are? How does she define vulnerability? How will providers be monitored—the word “monitoring” comes up again—and managed to ensure that they do not just ignore the advice and disregard individual needs? That is quite a list of questions for the Minister and, if she is not prepared sufficiently to reply to them today, I ask that she write to me and publish the reply, because we all need that level of understanding.

We must also work to reduce the use of large-scale houses in multiple occupation. In particular, vulnerable service users such as pregnant women, new mothers, victims of violence or torture, and those with physical and mental health needs should not be in large-scale HMOs. Proper and effective vulnerability screening needs to take place regularly in asylum accommodation to identify individuals with specific support needs, such as those with mental health issues, the survivors of sexual and gender-based violence, survivors of trafficking, pregnant women, young mothers and LGBT individuals. Sadly, the existing contract often fails here, too. The experts on those issues tell me that the new contract is no better. I ask the Minister, what will change in the contract to sort this out? These people need to feel safe and secure in order to be able to rebuild their lives away from the horror they have escaped.

I received a briefing note from Doctors of the World, which recommended that the contracts be amended to ensure that those seeking asylum are provided with the right to register with a GP while housed in initial accommodation. It recommended that the contracts be amended to require accommodation providers to register vulnerable people with a GP within five working days of arrival at initial or dispersed accommodation. Does the Minister agree with those recommendations? Will she at least listen to the doctors and act on that?

The Government’s current position is that accommodation should be safe and habitable, but those are largely relative assessment factors. What is safe for
someone who has experienced physical and mental torture? What is habitable to someone who has severe and advanced physical needs? Temporary accommodation should mean exactly that—not six months of never-ending uncertainty and despair. There have been cases in this country under the contracts where there has been a lack of access to suitable nutritious food, a lack of access to drinking water—right here in 21st century Britain—and a lack of a clean and hygienic environment. There are also examples of bullying from staff at large accommodation facilities. One person, when complaining about the food at the hotel where they had been placed, was told by a manager from the hotel that they would simply, “Tell the Home Office to take you away”—a direct violation of the specific stipulation that asylum seekers should be treated with sensitivity. There must be a complaints management system to provide ways and means for asylum seekers to raise complaints. Instead, they are threatened with removal by the Home Office. That is not a proper complaints management process.

The Home Office has a choice: it can choose to work with local authorities, third-sector organisations and other hon. Members of this House, or Ministers can bury their heads in the sand and try to wipe away their responsibility for another 10 years. But we will not let them forget it and we will keep using our voices to stand up for those who are resident in our country and just want to get by and live their lives.

I have more questions for the Minister to address. Would she be content knowing that her own child was sleeping in a cold, damp house with just a duvet with a 6.5 tog rating? Could she sleep at night if she had an 18-year-old daughter who was sharing a room with a stranger, whose background she did not know? Would she be okay watching cockroaches and rodents crawl across the floor and perhaps on to the bed, while her children were trying to sleep? That is the reality that some people in asylum accommodation are going through.

I have talked extensively—I do not apologise for it at all—about monitoring provision. I wonder whether the Minister has ever visited the supposedly temporary accommodation of asylum seekers. I would be pleased if she has. Maybe next time she could come to Stockton unannounced and see what people have to put up with, rather than going to a place where a provider can set things up for a nice, pleasant ministerial experience.

We have a duty of care over people who are in this country, the conditions they live in and how they are treated. The Minister still has the opportunity to take on board the suggestions from dozens of organisations that really want to help the Government and our refugees. I hope she will take a step back, think and do just that. I look forward to her response.

Several hon. Members rose—

Mrs Anne Main (in the Chair): Order. Given the number of hon. Members who are seeking to catch my eye, I will impose, with immediate effect, a time limit of four minutes.

2.54 pm

Alex Sobel (Leeds North West) (Lab/Co-op): I congratulate my hon. Friend the Member for Stockton North (Alex Cunningham) on securing this important debate.

There are so many horror stories about asylum accommodation in the UK and so many reasons why we need independent oversight that it would be impossible to cover everything in the time I have, but I hope that what I do share gives an understanding of how outsourcing companies acting like vultures are faking our most vulnerable. I hope these contracts can be delivered better locally by those who have the interests of the residents at heart.

G4S holds a contract in the giant north-east England, Yorkshire and Humber region. It has a home for 14 mothers and 14 babies in my constituency. I was first contacted about the property by the manager of a local children’s centre, who described a multitude of issues and the unwillingness of G4S to act. On visiting the house, the first thing that struck me was the stickiness underfoot and the smell of urine. That was the result of an earlier rat infestation, which was reported to G4S and ignored.

Although the local church stepped in and blocked the rats’ entrance to the bedroom, the carpet remained coated in rat urine. A toddler crawling over the carpet had a skin infection. Her mother told me, “There is nowhere else for her to go.” That was not strictly true. Her baby could have crawled in the hallway, where a missing baby gate left a steep set of stairs exposed—something of which G4S had been informed months before. Or perhaps the child could crawl around the kitchen, where rat poison was left on the floor and mould covered every wall.

There are other issues in the property, including a lack of cleaning and cooking equipment, which G4S should have provided. After writing to G4S in exasperation, I met the landlord of the property, who stepped in and provided what G4S did not. That was in addition to the maintenance requests that G4S had failed to pass on, increasing its profit margin at someone else’s expense.

Vermin is a common theme in these properties. Another woman living with a young child reported a mice infestation, caused by holes in the walls of the property. G4S refused to be held accountable. Instead of dealing with it, it sent the woman on a training course in kitchen hygiene. After six months of complaining, and with multiple open wounds caused by mice biting her face, she went to Leeds City Council, which acted swiftly to solve the problem. That cost should have been covered by the asylum accommodation contract. However, the public sector had to step in, subsidising the private sector. It is not only G4S that is failing. I heard about one young woman who moved into Serco-run accommodation only to find human faeces smeared on her bedroom wall. She cleaned it up, but the cockroaches and rodents were more persistent.

These stories represent the dark side of Conservative ideology—a disturbing faith in privatisation and outsourcing, no matter the human cost, and the growing ideology—a disturbing faith in privatisation and outsourcing, no matter the human cost, and the growing ideology—a disturbing faith in privatisation and outsourcing, no matter the human cost, and the growing ideology—a disturbing faith in privatisation and outsourcing, no matter the human cost, and the growing ideology—a disturbing faith in privatisation and outsourcing, no matter the human cost, and the growing ideology—a disturbing faith in privatisation and outsourcing, no matter the human cost, and the growing
private sector could not, the landlord, who stepped in, and my staff and local party members, who helped to provide basic items that G4S would not.

Karen Lee (Lincoln) (Lab): Does my hon. Friend agree that, in cases such as this, local authorities ought to be empowered to take over these contracts and oversee them, because this situation clearly is not acceptable?

Alex Sobel: It is absolutely not acceptable. I was just coming on to those points, which I thank my hon. Friend for raising. As she said, it is not up to individual and local groups to step in. These contracts cost millions of pounds in public funds, but struggling local authorities step in to prevent homelessness when the private firms cannot fulfil their contracts. Our councils are expected to bail out these companies, but they are not granted any oversight of the delivery of their contracts. That is both insulting and impractical. It has created a system lacking in democracy and dignity.

Everyone deserves a safe and secure home in this country. These contracts must be revisited. Councils and charities must have a central role in ensuring that the safety of asylum seekers is the priority in delivery. There must also be independent oversight of these contracts to ensure that people come before profit.

2.59 pm

Jim Shannon (Strangford) (DUP): I want to congratulate the hon. Member for Stockton North (Alex Cunningham) on bringing this debate to the House and on his excellent presentation. I thank him for giving us all an opportunity to make a contribution.

I want to address a couple of points to the Minister, which are specific to Northern Ireland, in relation to how the Home Office looks at some of these issues. I want that to be on the record and, if possible, for the Minister to get back to me and to let me know how we can improve the system to help people in Northern Ireland.

My Friend the hon. Member for Glasgow North (Patrick Grady) told me that he has similar issues to the ones that I see in Northern Ireland, particularly in Belfast. As we are all aware, and contrary to what we have heard touted, asylum seekers are not permitted to work or to receive mainstream social security benefits. I am concerned that the financial support is £37.50 per person per week, and that accommodation is provided on a no-choice basis, so if an asylum seeker refuses an offer of accommodation, she will be denied access to ongoing support. I am concerned about that, and I want to put it on record. The stories that we have heard about the accommodation, and others that we will hear later, clearly illustrate the issue. Asylum seekers may also be required to move accommodation at short notice, which creates problems by its very nature.

The view of the Law Centre NI is that asylum seekers living in Northern Ireland may face particular difficulties that are not reflected in Home Office decision making and guidance. An asylum seeker seeking an accommodation transfer due to racial harassment is generally required to provide documentary evidence in the form of police reports. Unfortunately, we are aware of cases where asylum seekers do not feel able to approach the police to seek their help. That can be because of a lack of trust, which can arise due to negative experiences of policing in the countries they came from—it is not necessarily to do with our police force; it is to do with their experience and what has happened to them.

Lack of trust is also prevalent in particular neighbourhoods in Belfast as a legacy of the conflict. That is a fact, so we have to address that issue as well. It means that, despite encouragement from support organisations, asylum seekers do not seek assistance from the Police Service of Northern Ireland.

In such instances, there may be other forms of evidence. I suggest to the Minister that we look at medical reports to enable the consideration of alternative accommodation. Mental health issues may arise from a fear of a particular neighbour, but the Home Office is not likely to accept such forms of evidence. Gently and honestly, I request that the Minister looks at alternative ways to address the issue—whether it is mental or physical health. Let us do that, and give these things an equal status with the police.

As the Minister will understand, and as I am sure everyone else does too, we must be ever mindful that we have had 30 years of conflict, so things are different in Northern Ireland. Another example of a situation that is particularly acute in Northern Ireland is when children are moved to a new area away from their school. Parents must make a difficult decision, either to transfer their children to a new school, assuming school places are available, which is disruptive to the children’s education, or to make arrangements for their children to continue at their old school. That is not an option, because £37.50 per person means that people cannot put their child on the bus to school. Difficulties also arise when a child walks through a neighbourhood wearing a school uniform associated with the “other” community. These are real things that are happening, which is why I want to bring them to the Minister’s attention in the short time I have.

I ask the Home Office to review and revise its allocation of accommodation policy to better reflect the particular circumstances of Northern Ireland. In particular, Home Office guidance should provide for greater discretion. I also refer to my earlier request regarding an asylum matter involving the extension of the refugee transition period from 28 days to 56 days. I hope the Minister can take all that in.

3.3 pm

Chris Stephens (Glasgow South West) (SNP): I have no doubt that, when I sit down after making my remarks, I will receive a threatening letter from the chief executive of Serco, as has happened on the last two occasions that we have debated the issue. I have had to go to Mr Speaker twice for a ruling on that correspondence.

This summer in Glasgow, Serco threatened 330 asylum seekers with immediate eviction. It was during the parliamentary recess and Glasgow City Council’s recess. Was that a coincidence? We all know the answer to that. If it had not happened during recess, an urgent question would have been tabled the very next day after Serco had announced that it was threatening those 330 asylum seekers with immediate eviction.

Why did Serco threaten them with immediate eviction? It claimed they were failed asylum seekers, but refugee and asylum charities established within days that they were not. Many had lodged an appeal, and many had submitted a fresh claim. Why did that multinational
[Chris Stephens]

profit-making company think it was appropriate to threaten 300 asylum seekers with lock changes and eviction—to put them on to the streets? Obviously, there had been no meaningful discussions between the local authority and the Home Office about sharing information. Why is that?

The average time it takes for someone to make a section 4 application and receive a decision about getting support is 37 days. Frankly, I do not think that that is good enough. The only reason that not one asylum seeker in Glasgow has been evicted is the Govan Law Centre, which raised a case in the Court of Session on behalf of two of my constituents. I thank my fellow Glaswegians and my fellow Glasgow Members of Parliament who attended all the protests. It was quite clear that the anger in Glasgow was such that hundreds would have been outside the accommodation if Serco had gone there and tried to issue a lock change to lock asylum seekers out of their accommodation. It is clear that the people of Glasgow were going to use their human rights to protect the human rights of others.

I thank the hon. Member for Stockton North (Alex Cunningham), and I stand shoulder to shoulder with him and many of the comments he made about the lack of engagement and meaningful consultation that is taking place with local authorities. That is clearly the position that has been adopted by Glasgow City Council, which has made public its concerns, as have the local authorities in the hon. Gentleman’s constituency. The Local Government Association is supported by the Convention of Scottish Local Authorities in that.

I have dealt with constituents—asylum seekers—who were the victims of sexual violence. The accommodation providers thought that it was appropriate to put those women in a tenemental property where the other five occupants were single men. If the providers had had meaningful consultation and dialogue with the local authorities and the Home Office, we could have avoided that situation. That is one of the many errors that we are seeing. My real concern is that, with the new 10-year contracts, those mistakes will be made again.

3.7 pm

Sir Edward Davey (Kingston and Surbiton) (LD): I congratulate the hon. Member for Stockton North (Alex Cunningham) on securing the debate. I thank him for the work he has done with my friend, Suzanne Fletcher, from Citizens UK and Tees Valley of Sanctuary. She brought him one of the duvets that were provided, which were so thin that the health of the people who used them was hit—their limbs were affected and their general health deteriorated. That is one of the shocking examples of how poor service, and the failure to comply with basic human standards, are undermining the health of these people. We have already heard some graphic stories.

As I do not have much time, I will focus on asking the Minister about the contracts. We do not know an awful lot about them, although some local authorities have seen the statements of requirement, but they will be signed in the next few weeks—by the end of the year—and they are worth £4 billion over the next 10 years. This debate is timely because it gives the House a chance to scrutinise them and to ask what the Government are doing before they sign the contracts.

First, have local authorities been offered the contracts? It seems that they might be able to do a lot better with £4 billion over the next 10 years. I would not be surprised if they could do it for less, and it would be of higher quality. They could lock it in to their overall local housing strategy. Has there been any discussion with the Local Government Association, the Convention of Scottish Local Authorities or other local authority organisations about whether they could provide the services? If not, why not?

Secondly, we have heard a bit about sharing bedrooms from the hon. Member for Stockton North. There is no doubt that some of the most vulnerable people living in our country not only are being given some of the most shocking accommodation, but are being asked to share rooms, which is causing their mental health to deteriorate, as we heard in the graphic example from the hon. Member for Glasgow South West (Chris Stephens). We hear about people who left a country because they were afraid of another group of people in that country or a neighbouring country, and who, in this country, are being asked to share a room with people whom they tried to escape from or who are from a group they tried to escape from. The lack of sensitivity and understanding of the mental health needs of such people is extraordinary, so my second question is, can we go beyond just protecting an undefined group of vulnerable people? Can we not get to a point where people simply do not have to share bedrooms? It does not seem too unreasonable a question to ask or too unreasonable a criterion to have in the new contracts.

On monitoring quality, if local authorities had the contracts, there would be a group of people in the local authorities who could help monitor them. What reassurance can the Minister give us today that the contracts will be properly monitored, whether that is to do with duvets, quality of housing, advice or other aspects of the contracts that will be let?

I have not had a chance to read the statement of requirements. Why has that not been shared with Members of Parliament? Can aspects of the contract not be shared with Members of Parliament—perhaps the Home Affairs Committee—beforehand on whatever terms are needed? If Members can see the contracts, can the Minister tell us today whether there really will be minimum standards? A statement of requirements seems too wishy-washy. We need to know that legally enforceable minimum standards will be provided in the contracts so that people who are not getting them might have recourse to the law. That is the only way we can ensure that people will be treated properly. It is absolutely right that the contracts should have legal safeguards.

3.11 pm

Dame Caroline Spelman (Meriden) (Con): I will refer specifically to the case of Solihull, which, during my 23 years as an MP, has been a destination for unaccompanied asylum-seeking children. I want to raise with the Minister the legacy issues associated with accommodating the most vulnerable of the vulnerable: the children who arrive here on their own.

The difficulty that faces my local authority is the shortfall in costs of accommodating this vulnerable group, which are estimated to be in the order of £1 million a year. That might not sound like a lot to Members with larger local authorities, but mine is relatively small with a disproportionately high number of unaccompanied
asylum-seeking children. After a visit by the regional director of the UK Border Agency, whose staff spent a month embedded with the local authority, it was confirmed as a result of the audit that the costs could not be contained within the standard rates. So I want to raise with the Minister the problem that legacy or old standard grant rates have not been increased since they were introduced in 2011-12, eight years ago, during which time there has been considerable inflation.

To illustrate the shortfall in accommodation costs, the invoice costs of supported accommodation are £22 a day compared with the national grant rate of £28.57 a day, or a legacy grant rate of just £21.43 a day. The invoice costs of external foster accommodation for 16 and 17-year-old unaccompanied asylum-seeking children are £113 a day compared with the national grant rate of £91 a day, so there is a baked-in shortfall year on year. I know that the leader of the council has written to the Minister, but I want to place on the record the unique position of Solihull in doing its very best by the most vulnerable of the vulnerable.

3.13 pm

Jess Phillips (Birmingham, Yardley) (Lab): It is a pleasure to follow my neighbour and colleague in the midlands, the right hon. Member for Meriden (Dame Caroline Spelman). I associate myself with what she said. I also want to talk about the financial element of the contracts and how the money works. I do not know whether I am in an exclusive group in this room or perhaps this House, but I am somebody who has applied for a commissioning contract through a national Home Office contract, so I know what it takes to win a contract with the Home Office. I did it for accommodation for victims of human trafficking. When the Home Office, another Government Department or a local authority commissions things through the voluntary sector, I can tell Members that the monitoring, the length of contracts and the amount of money in the contracts is certainly not what has been suggested today when we have talked about the private sector. The idea of a 10-year contract—even a 10-minute contract—in the voluntary sector would be manna from heaven.

However, I have applied and was successful in the commissioning round of national contracts for accommodation and support services for victims of human trafficking. I remember the very detailed stuff I had to learn about special secure thumb turns for security, specialist issues around single-sex accommodation, specialist support that had to be provided, and the training that my staff had to have. It was very detailed, and rightly so. Nobody would criticise that.

The women we supported in the community—we provided support both in the community and within accommodation support services—were largely women who had been trafficked into sexual slavery and forced to have sex with 15 or 20 men a day. “Raped” is what I should say. Because of differences in where they came from and different immigration statuses, even though they were trafficked, some of those women stayed in National Asylum Support Service accommodation. So we would go out and support them in the community, and that took me to Stone Road in the centre of Birmingham.

I had to go and give financial support to a woman who had been through the national referral mechanism and been identified as being trafficked. I remember the level of security that I had to go through: the police checks and the training I had to do to get the contract as a voluntary sector provider. I went to Stone Road and asked to see the woman. She was on the run from a trafficking gang who had trafficked her for sex, and as I walked through the Stone Road accommodation I saw her name written on the wall with a message that said she had to pick up her post. It was just written there. Anyone could have walked in. Now that was not in the contract that I had to sign up to. The standard seemed to be different for G4S at Stone Road from what it was for me, the provider of secure accommodation for victims of human trafficking. The Home Office loves to trumpet how brilliantly it behaves, but it is the same people living in that accommodation.

When I meet the woman, she is pregnant and sleeping on a mattress on the floor. She looks a size 10, but she is nine months pregnant. We have managed to find her decent trafficking victim accommodation, but it is in Sheffield and I have to tell her she cannot go because the standards that my contract stipulate say that we cannot move a woman at that stage in her pregnancy because she needs continuity of care, and she cries and begs me to let her go because she cannot bear to live there any more. I simply want to ask the Minister why, for the same people and the same commissioning body, the standards are so different for me and for G4S.

3.17 pm

Helen Hayes (Dulwich and West Norwood) (Lab): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Mrs Main, and a pleasure to follow my hon. Friend the Member for Birmingham, Yardley (Jess Phillips), who spoke so powerfully about her direct experience. I congratulate my hon. Friend the Member for Stockton North (Alex Cunningham) on securing this important debate. I rise to speak because my constituency is home to Barry House, a hostel for people seeking asylum or refugee status in the UK, provided by Clearspings under the existing contract.

Barry House is categorised as initial accommodation, and it provides a temporary home for more than 100 people. I see many residents of Barry House in my surgeries, and I have visited it with an NHS team who provide outreach services there. When I visited I was told that there were 19 pregnant women and 40 children living there at that time. The information I have gathered from residents of Barry House speaks to a much wider set of problems with the current asylum contract.

Barry House is for short-term use, but the reality is that many people are there for long periods. Barry House is not fit for purpose. Conditions are cramped, there is no variation in or quality to the food, and there are no meaningful activities for residents. The corridors are obstructed by many buggies and there are a high number of wheelchair users, leading to concerns about fire safety and basic standards of accessibility. It is very poorly managed. There are infestations of vermin, and it is dirty. Everything about the quality of accommodation is poor, yet there is no accountability. When complaints are raised there is no response, and it is left to the council’s environmental health team to undertake inspections when things get really bad.

Barry House is not suitable for children, despite there being so many children and pregnant women staying there. It is difficult to place children in local schools as
there is no guarantee on how long they will be there. There is no support with language tuition and no support for the many people living at Barry House who are deeply traumatised by the experiences and situations from which they have fled. There is no structured access to health facilities. A dedicated team from Guy’s and St Thomas’ NHS Foundation Trust provides what support it can, but support for access to maternity services and any other type of specialist service is difficult to secure and very patchy.

Many residents of Barry House have been through levels of trauma and hardship that is hard to comprehend. There are high levels of physical disability and mental ill health. The instability, hardship and sheer monotony of having to spend long periods at Barry House or in accommodation like it is no way to treat people who are fleeing conflict or persecution. The new contract must address the current problems. There must be a service standard for the timescale on which people are forced to stay in initial accommodation such as Barry House—a time after which they must be moved to suitable accommodation. There must be proper accountability for the quality of accommodation. When overcrowding, infestations, damp, dirt or poor quality food are raised, the providers must be held to account, with financial penalties if necessary. Councils must be empowered and funded to step in if the issues are not addressed. There must be funding for emergency short-term psychological support for people suffering trauma. It is simply not acceptable for people with high levels of mental health need as a consequence of their experiences to be left to cope on their own. There must be provision in situ for language teaching, early years activity for children and education, where school places cannot be provided.

There is a relationship between the situation at Barry House and the wider dysfunctionality of the Home Office. People are at Barry House for long periods partly because their applications are not being determined, or because applications are refused and they must appeal. The constituent I saw a few weeks ago, who, as a Red Cross employee, was shot four times by Hezbollah in Lebanon, should not be appealing a refusal by the Home Office. The way that the Government treat those who seek asylum in the UK is part of the wider hostile environment. There is no support, comfort or dignity, and the UK can and must do better than this.

3.21 pm

**Thangam Debbonaire** (Bristol West) (Lab): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Mrs Main. I extend my thanks to my hon. Friend the Member for Stockton North (Alex Cunningham) for securing the debate. I shall try hard not to repeat what has already been said, so there are lots of crossings out in my notes, but I want to try to pin the Minister down, and I hope she will respond on some specifics.

Someone who was forced to make the heart-rending decision to leave their home, family, friends and community, and who made a long, perilous journey to reach a place of sanctuary and safety, would hope to be welcomed by a country that wanted to pride itself on the welcome it gave to victims of torture and conflict. However, as other Members have said, for too many the welcome is to unhygienic, unsafe and unpleasant accommodation—for which the taxpayer is paying. That serves no one, and I hope that the case has already been made powerfully enough to mean that the Minister will want to take up the cause.

The Government should have known the situation long ago, because the contracts in question are Government contracts, but even if that was not the case, last December’s report of the Select Committee on Home Affairs on asylum accommodation should have made the matter clear. I have personally seen cases, through visiting asylum accommodation in my constituency, I have also talked to survivors of torture and trafficking, and to other people who have been in the asylum system. The report made it clear that the incidents in question are not exceptions proving any sort of rule of an otherwise well functioning asylum system. They are symptomatic of wider problems, but they also show specific deficiencies in the design and delivery of the asylum accommodation contracts.

I agree wholeheartedly with the organisations that have provided helpful briefings, some of which are represented in the Public Gallery today. They include Asylum Matters, Freedom from Torture, Doctors of the World, the Refugee Council and many other third sector organisations, as well as others from my constituency, such as Bristol Refugee Rights, Borderlands, Bristol Hospitality Network and Aid Box Community. Also, Councillor Ruth Pickersgill goes above and beyond in my example I have known, as a councillor supporting refugees and asylum seekers. All of them have told me that the situation must change. The new asylum accommodation and support services contracts should be an opportunity to right the wrongs and ensure that taxpayers’ money funds decent accommodation, reflecting us as the compassionate and welcoming country that we want to be. I therefore ask the Minister whether she will commit to publishing at least the statement of requirements and performance management regime for the new contracts.

Those of us who have visited asylum accommodation or discussed it with refugees and asylum seekers, as well as with the Government, know that if the implementation of the contracts is delayed, or if providers fail to live up to the terms, local authorities, third sector organisations and compassionate individuals will pick up the pieces, but that is not a good way of running the system. We need nothing short of a completely new approach to the way we take responsibility for refugees. The Minister has been very welcoming to me, my hon. Friend the Member for Stretford and Urmston (Kate Green) and others in discussing necessary changes, but I want to remind her of how those changes connect to housing. On a global level, the UN global compact on refugees provides a helpful model on resettlement. The Minister knows that I want an end to indefinite detention, particularly for survivors of torture but also for other vulnerable people such as victims of trafficking; increased places on resettlement schemes; the comprehensive introduction of classes in English for speakers of other languages; the abolition of healthcare charges; and the right for asylum seekers to work after six months. Those things could all help to ease the pressure on accommodation, but they would also all require the accommodation to be good.

I invite the Home Office and the Minister to let politicians, local authorities and others, and the public, see what is behind the curtain, and to open the tendering
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accommodation for seven years. They are subject to
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for Glasgow South West (Chris Stephens), on his speech.
No sooner did the summer recess hit than we found we were dealing with a major crisis in the city of Glasgow, because Serco announced its intention to undertake mass evictions of asylum seekers. Indeed, in my constituency, which has the highest population of asylum seekers in Scotland and, indeed, the UK, I have had to deal with 106 asylum cases in the past five months alone, largely because of Home Office service level failures. I do not think it is the job of Members of Parliament to do the Home Office’s job for it and to have to deal with that level of failure. Clearly the asylum contract is not working. I do not know whether the new proposal will deal with the issue, because there is no clarity about it.
I want to pay tribute to those working in the area of refugees’ and asylum seekers’ housing, who stepped up when there was failure and crisis in Glasgow, including the Living Rent campaign and the Scottish Refugee Council, as well as numerous registered social landlords across Glasgow who undertook collectively to say that there would be no forced evictions from their properties under the Serco contract. That is to their credit. They stood up for what was morally right in the face of Home Office and Serco insubinsence. It is clear that the message needs to be taken on board at the Home Office. Glasgow will not accept that level of indignity and callousness in dealing with the “move on” policy.

Stewart Malcolm McDonald (Glasgow South) (SNP): As well as being undignified, it is not that approach also counterproductive? It forces people into further destitution and the black economy and the rest of it, with people effectively going missing.

Mr Sweeney: The hon. Gentleman makes a pertinent point. The self-contained parallel bureaucratic process does not interface in any meaningful way with other services provided in the dispersal areas, such as integrated assistance provided by the city council and associated NGOs. As for the fundamental definition, what does it mean to have exhausted the asylum application process? There is no clear definition of what that means, which is why in most cases the service providers will act to maximise profit, dealing with things in an overly bureaucratic, distant and dubious manner.

One example is the Umeed family in my constituency, who have been living in so-called temporary accommodation for seven years. They are subject to relentless antisocial behaviour, which has had a serious impact on their mental health and that of their young children. Yet they show dignity in their situation. Time and again we confront people who show immense dignity in the face of an appalling situation. That is the clear issue. When the “move on” policy is applied to people who have achieved refugee status, the fact that it is so rapid creates huge trauma for people trying to go through the transition. My young constituent Giorgi, whose mother died earlier in the year—he is a 10-year-old orphan—was granted leave to remain. He was told within seven days that he had to leave his temporary accommodation, leave his school and seek accommodation elsewhere in Glasgow, which would wrench him out of all that he had left in his life of sustaining comfort and established order. That shows how the policy is failing even young children, and how disgusting the contract is.

I want to understand a few things about what the new contract will do. What checks will be carried out to ensure that accommodation is habitable? Who will define and monitor the minimum quality standards for housing, and what assessment has been made of the habitability of accommodation provided since 2012? It is clear that for most people it is below the liveable standard. What assessment and review has the Department made of the current asylum accommodation approach, and particularly the work carried out by contractors such as Serco? It has been dealing with the “move on” policy in particular. I should like the Minister to assess the impact of the change in approach at local level since 2012 when, for example, the YMCA provided the contract in Glasgow, which is now provided by Serco. What change has that meant to the quality of service provision?

What provisions exist in the new draft asylum contract for future Governments to alter or terminate that contract, and what costs would those provisions incur? What learning from the current contract period has been used to inform the design of the new contract? Did it involve engaging with the views of asylum seekers or speaking to charities on the ground to assess and improve the contract? I do not think any of that has happened, and there has been no discussion and no indication whatsoever that such things have taken place.

I note that the hon. Member for East Renfrewshire (Paul Masterton) is sitting behind the Minister as her understudy, but there has not been a word from the Scottish Conservative party on this issue throughout the summer. I have great respect for the hon. Gentleman, but he should stand up and be counted. The 13 Scottish Conservative MPs hold the balance of power in Government, and they should start exercising that power in the interests of the most vulnerable people in Scotland today.

Mrs Anne Main (in the Chair): Before I call the Front-Bench speakers, may I remind them that we wish to leave one minute for the mover of the motion? To give the Minister plenty of opportunity to respond, perhaps the Opposition speakers could confine their remarks so that a lot of the questions can be answered.

3.30 pm

Stuart C. McDonald (Cumbernauld, Kilsyth and Kirkintilloch East) (SNP): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Mrs Main, and I pay tribute to the hon. Member for Stockton North (Alex Cunningham) for securing this debate. We are at a hugely significant moment for our asylum accommodation system, and this debate could not have been more timely. It is great to see such a significant turnout.
Members have, quite rightly, used this opportunity to highlight the many problems that have beset COMPASS asylum accommodation contracts almost from the beginning. Those problems included poor—sometimes absolutely shocking—standards of accommodation and furnishings, and we heard a particular horror story from the hon. Member for Leeds North West (Alex Sobel). We heard about inappropriate accommodation allocation and the forced sharing of bedrooms, about totally ineffective complaints and inspection regimes, and about disregard for the needs and vulnerabilities of torture survivors—my hon. Friend the Member for Glasgow South West (Chris Stephens) gave an appalling example of that.

We heard about the outrageous conduct of certain providers, including in Glasgow, as several Glasgow MPs have described, and about the linked issues of asylum support levels and transition periods, which were highlighted by the hon. Member for Strangford (Jim Shannon). The right hon. Member for Kingston and Surbiton (Sir Edward Davey) spoke about the design of the contracts, and how that makes it impossible for local authorities to compete. Indeed, Glasgow City Council expressed an interest in taking on one of these contracts, but the design made it impossible for that idea to be taken forward.

The sad fact is that none of this is remotely surprising—we have heard the same criticisms over and over again from asylum seekers, from organisations that do such fantastic work on their behalf, and from the Home Affairs Committee, the National Audit Office and the Public Accounts Committee. The fundamental problem behind all this is that local authorities are not being given an appropriate oversight role and powers to determine provision in their areas, and nor are they, or other partner organisations, given the necessary resources to support all the work and services required in dispersal areas. That has to stop.

This debate is slightly different, however, because the Home Office has now pushed the whole system of asylum accommodation to breaking point. Some key local authorities that have been involved in the scheme for decades are now saying enough is enough, and they are seriously looking at withdrawal from it. Responsibility for that lies squarely with the Home Office, which has repeatedly failed to address those concerns, which have been expressed again today, instead playing them down and tinkering around the edges. Our local authorities have been pushed too far.

As hon. Members have said, the expiry of the COMPASS contracts provides the perfect opportunity to deliver fundamental reform and to safeguard and improve asylum accommodation provision. Instead, the Home Office has decided to press on with a new set of contracts that repeat so many of the flaws in the existing model, including a lack of proper accountability, a lack of oversight for local authorities and a lack of proper resources to allow them to fulfil their duties. As the hon. Member for Stockton North said, having contracts for 10 years is reckless and wrong.

The Home Office must think again urgently and listen to the requests and calls made by participating authorities and organisations that work with asylum seekers. Those bodies are calling for equal partner status for local authorities involved in the new contracts, and for full disclosure of terms and conditions. They call for full transparency and accountability from contractors when sharing information requested by local authorities to support the work they do on dispersal. They are calling for local authorities to have full authority over dispersal levels and cluster limits at a council and ward level, and for the Home Office’s power to overrule councils on procurement decisions to be brought to an end. The Home Office should directly and adequately fund local authorities to undertake all the work they do in supporting asylum seekers effectively. That includes those destitute families that the Home Office prevents from accessing public funds.

Other sensible proposals were presented by the hon. Member for Stockton North, so will the Minister listen to those perfectly reasonable asks and engage with dispersal authorities about them during her imminent four nations meeting? If the Government will not listen to those asks and engage with the authorities, the Minister must explain the consequences of their alternative approach. For example, do they accept that they are required to re-engage with existing dispersal authorities to seek their participation in the new contracts, or is it the Government’s position that having endured COMPASS 1, those authorities have no option but to continue on to COMPASS 2? In the latter case, what is the legal basis for that assertion, and what will happen if councils take a different approach?

Will the Minister clarify her Department’s plan B if key local authorities withdraw from the scheme? Would the Department seriously consider attempting to procure private accommodation and place asylum seekers in cities without engaging dispersal-area councils? Does she believe that the legislation gives her those powers? If she is seriously stating that funding for local authorities is already sufficient, will she provide accountability by setting out the funding formula used for that in an easily comprehensible published document?

In conclusion, the ball is very much in the court of the Home Office. There is a chance to reform the system in a positive way, benefiting communities and asylum seekers alike. Equally, however, there is a genuine risk of an escalating crisis if the Home Office gets this wrong. This time, it must listen and act on all the concerns raised today.
babies, this was in fact a mixed hostel, with families in the basement, and the upper floors inhabited by men. One mother was forced to stay in such accommodation for months, even after her doctor and health visitor had asked for her to be moved. As I said at the time, nobody, let alone families with children, should be forced to live with cockroaches, bedbugs, damp, leaks and mice.

The even greater tragedy, however, is that that was not an isolated case—we have heard about such things again and again this afternoon. The conditions in much asylum accommodation have long been appalling, and concerns have been raised consistently and by a wide range of parliamentary and external bodies. The Home Affairs Committee, the National Audit Office and the Public Accounts Committee have all published highly critical reports of the current COMPASS contracts.

Less than a year ago, I was in this Chamber discussing urgent recommendations made by the Home Affairs Committee, many of which have yet to be resolved. The Home Secretary is currently sitting on a report from the independent chief inspector of borders and immigration, which was sent to him on 9 July and should have been published within eight weeks. Third sector organisations and faith and community groups have been ringing alarm bells about the contracts for years. Last month, 14 local authorities took the unprecedented step of writing to the Home Secretary to warn that the asylum accommodation system is on the brink of collapse, and that he must personally step in. It is therefore unacceptable and profoundly undemocratic that the Government are taking an “as is” approach to the new contracts, which are due to be renewed next month.

What Labour is calling for, and what a Labour Government would oversee, is the return of responsibility for asylum accommodation, and the billions that come with it, to local authorities. In the absence of that, the very reasonable key recommendations from local authorities and third sector and community groups should be incorporated.

There are three broad issues that urgently need to be addressed. First, key stakeholders are being kept in the dark on the procurement process. Feedback during the consultation was not taken on board, and problems were treated as one-offs, rather than as symptomatic of wider failings. In a letter to the Home Secretary, the leaders of eight local authorities in Yorkshire said they were disappointed by the decision to seemingly limit public scrutiny until the re-tender process was closed. They described the transition to the current COMPASS contracts in 2012 as a failure, with mass sudden homelessness prevented only by local authorities stepping in.

Local authorities, charities and community groups are an essential part of asylum accommodation delivery. They are already central to integrating asylum seekers, and they are the ones who step in when things go wrong. It is essential that the Government are transparent with both the public and Parliament during this procurement process.

Secondly, local authorities lack oversight over asylum accommodation. Asylum seekers are not evenly distributed across the UK; with 35 local authorities—less than 10% of the total—hosting three quarters of the asylum seekers in dispersal accommodation. Many towns and cities across the north of England have more asylum seekers in a handful of wards than entire regions in the south and east of the UK. This often causes problems in local areas, especially as local authorities have no power to veto where accommodation will be procured.

I outlined earlier the awful condition of some accommodation. Local authorities need the power to inspect properties and safeguard vulnerable people. Despite being the ones who step in when contracts fall short, often to prevent destitution, local authorities do not have the power to regulate the conditions of asylum accommodation. The new contracts must give more powers and resources to local authorities to oversee and inspect accommodation in their areas.

Finally, all these measures must improve the shocking conditions of asylum accommodation. No one should be forced to share a bedroom, and providers should respect local rules on homes in multiple occupation. There must be better provision for vulnerable asylum seekers. To highlight just one example, pregnant women are being moved late in their pregnancy and at very short notice, interrupting their maternity care. That can have a significant impact on the mental health of the women, who have often already faced significant trauma.

Maternity Action has called on the Government to require contractors to comply with existing Home Office guidance on the dispersal of pregnant women and new mothers and to collect data to enable the Home Office to monitor compliance with that guidance.

The proposed COMPASS contracts are worth £4 billion and will be binding for the next 10 years, with no review period built in. The previous contracts did not have adequate review provisions, but there was at least a break clause after five years. So far, the Government have not recognised or addressed the wide-ranging criticisms of the current arrangements. Will the Minister commit to taking a more transparent approach to ending the appalling conditions that are, at the moment, common in asylum accommodation?

3.43 pm

The Minister for Immigration (Caroline Nokes): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Mrs Main. I add my congratulations to the hon. Member for Stockton North (Alex Cunningham) on having secured the debate, and I thank all right hon. and hon. Members who have contributed. I will do my best in the time allowed to answer all the questions asked of me. Members did incredibly well in their four allocated minutes to convey their key points. It is always a huge frustration when time runs out. I will undoubtedly drive my officials, who are sat behind me, slightly potty, because I am about to divert completely from my script and respond to some of the important points that have been made, for which I apologise.

In no particular order, the hon. Member for Cumbernauld, Kilsyth and Kirkintilloch East (Stuart C. McDonald) made a point about dispersal engagement. No doubt I will at some point return to my script and find the actual points that I am supposed to make on this issue, which will no doubt detail precisely the engagement that has already taken place. Suffice it to say that I am conscious of the debt we owe those local authorities that are part of the dispersal areas and which work incredibly hard to make available services and facilities to enable those seeking asylum to integrate into local communities.
We have already started a dialogue about how we can increase the number of dispersal areas. We all know that the more that we are able to disperse asylum seekers among different local authorities, the easier it is for those authorities to manage. Indeed, it is better for our communities for there to be a wide range of people living within them and contributing to the better integration of asylum seekers.

I have engaged in discussions over the past few months with some metropolitan mayors, local authorities, the Local Government Association, the Convention of Scottish Local Authorities and other groups of local authorities that come together—it would be wrong of me to try to remember all of the local authorities that I have engaged with. Serious conversations are ongoing about how we can increase the number of dispersal areas, whether I have the power to mandate that and whether that is the right way forward. In my view, it is better to engage with local authorities and to encourage them to take part in dispersal schemes. My gut instinct is that that has to be the right way.

I have learned from engagement with local authorities—hon. Members might expect to hear this from someone who spent a happy 12 years on a local authority—that they sometimes come up with the best solutions and ideas. I know that the right hon. Member for Kingston and Surbiton (Sir Edward Davey) will undoubtedly pick me up on this, but it is true that no local authorities have come forward as part of this bidding process. It may well be that the procurement process that we are bound to take part in, as current members of the European Union, is too prohibitive and difficult for local authorities, which would be a matter of profound regret.

Stuart C. McDonald: City councils have provided asylum accommodation while the United Kingdom has been a member of the European Union, so it is not the European Union that is at fault here but the design of the contract. Glasgow City Council previously provided such accommodation, but it cannot, for example, provide asylum accommodation for the whole of Scotland. It has to be broken down into much smaller units.

Caroline Nokes: The hon. Gentleman makes an important point. Glasgow City Council will of course not seek to provide accommodation for the whole of Scotland, and perhaps there is a very good case for breaking contracts down further, which might increase engagement from local authorities. I have to say that I am never averse to the greater engagement and involvement of local authorities. We all know that, first, local authorities are very good at providing services and, secondly, people in a crisis often turn to the local authority first.

Sir Edward Davey: Have the Minister or her officials talked to different local authorities to see what sort of contract they would be able to bid for? It is clearly not an argument that local authorities cannot bid for contracts because of the European process; they do that every day. It is a question of whether the Home Office is willing to design the contracts in a way that would be achievable for local authorities.

Caroline Nokes: Officials have of course engaged with local authorities and will continue to do so, and they have shared with both local authorities and stakeholders the statement of requirements, which has been the subject of much discussion among some Members this afternoon. I am perfectly happy to share that statement of requirements, as some hon. Members requested. I see absolutely no obstacle to doing that, given that we have already shared it with a number of stakeholders and local authorities.

The hon. Members for Glasgow North East (Mr Sweeney) and for Glasgow South West (Chris Stephens) raised the Serco contract, and the hon. Member for Glasgow South West commented on the timing of Serco’s announcement. From Serco’s perspective it was probably very unfortunate timing, as I was pretty much already on my way to Glasgow. However, that gave me the opportunity to have some very constructive engagement with Glasgow City Council, and later with the Scottish Government.

I am perhaps sometimes too much of an optimist and look for the positives in even very negative situations, and one thing that situation taught us is the benefit of making sure that there are information-sharing mechanisms between the Home Office, local government and the accommodation providers. That is absolutely key. We must all instinctively understand that by sharing information, we will get a better outcome. To be frank, one can face the obstacle of not being allowed to share sensitive data, but we are all working towards the right outcome for individuals so we actually have to find mechanisms—not just for the Glasgow contract, but across all these contracts—to find a better way to share information.

Chris Stephens: Does the Minister share my concern that Serco was bandying around unfortunate terms such as “failed asylum seekers”? Will the Minister tell us from where Serco received the information that there were 300 so-called failed asylum seekers?

Caroline Nokes: It would be unfair of me today to comment on numbers without having them immediately to hand, but what is clear through that process, as I think the hon. Member for Glasgow North East pointed out, is that some of those individuals had submitted additional claims for asylum and some were still at an appeals process. That absolutely indicates that the information sharing has to be of the highest quality.

We all know, although Members may find it uncomfortable, that through the asylum process there are many opportunities to submit appeals and to make fresh or additional claims. That sometimes puts accommodation providers, and indeed the Home Office, in the difficult position of having to consider claims and have them properly go through the courts. When people’s claims for asylum are found by the courts not to be appropriate, of course we have to take action. In situations where there are people in accommodation that should actually be used by new asylum claimants or those who are at an earlier stage in the process, we are left in a very difficult situation. As the Home Office—I have been completely candid about this—we have to improve our ability to ensure that those with no valid claim for asylum are assisted to return to their country of origin; unfortunately, we have to do that.
Several hon. Members rose—

Caroline Nokes: I can see that I am about to be intervened on; I will give way to the hon. Member for Bristol West (Thangam Debbonaire), who has not yet intervened on me.

Thangam Debbonaire: I am very grateful to the Minister for giving way. Will she agree that that assertion would perhaps have more support from across the House if it was not for the very large number of rejected asylum claims that are overturned on appeal? Indeed, from some countries it is the majority that are overturned. Her claim does not really add up if we are being asked to agree that people should be removed when they have further rights to appeal to remain and when those appeals often succeed.

Caroline Nokes: I did not say that people who were not at the end of the process should be returned to their country of origin, and I am very conscious—perhaps more conscious than many—of how long the process takes, how many opportunities there are for appeal and, indeed, how often further information is brought forward. There is much more work to do to speed up the process and ensure that Home Office processes are accurate at the earliest possible stage. However, a lot of that is about finding mechanisms for people who are going through the process to bring forward as much information as possible as soon as possible. When information is not forthcoming at the outset and not all the information is available, it is very difficult to make a determination.

Several hon. Members rose—

Caroline Nokes: I will continue to give way; I give way to the hon. Member for Dulwich and West Norwood (Helen Hayes).

Helen Hayes: I thank the Minister for giving way. Since she is talking about problems with the process, I will put on the record the very serious concerns raised by Freedom from Torture and others about the lack of medical expertise in the asylum assessment process, which, in large part, is a cause of the inaccurate decisions that her Department is making.

Caroline Nokes: I thank the hon. Lady for putting that on the record. I have a comment on the medical processes somewhere in my notes; I may not find it in the course of the next few minutes, but I will try to. Of course we can—at all times and in all ways—improve on our systems, and I am absolutely determined that we will find better ways to ensure that information can be brought forward earlier.

Several hon. Members rose—

Caroline Nokes: I will give way to the hon. Member for Glasgow North East, because he has been very patient.

Mr Sweeney: I thank the Minister for giving way on that point. When Rupert Soames phoned me in July to describe his concerns about the contract, as he saw them, he said it was actually the charity of Serco’s shareholders that was keeping people in accommodation for far longer than they were being funded by the Home Office. Somewhere in that balance, there is clearly a point where the Home Office is prematurely cutting funding for provision of housing. Surely there should be a longer cooling-off period to enable legal counsel to be consulted, to see if the intent is to appeal and so on and so forth before people are turfed out of their housing by Serco.

Caroline Nokes: I refer the hon. Gentleman back to my comments about information sharing and ensuring that information is accurate, because that is the only way in which we will make the best decisions.

Several hon. Members rose—

Caroline Nokes: I am sorry; I will not give way again for a little while, because there were a couple of other points in the debate that I found particularly poignant and that I wanted to pick up on.

The hon. Member for Strangford (Jim Shannon) painted a very clear picture of how the situation in Northern Ireland could be different. His description of children walking through certain areas in a school uniform that was different from that of other children particularly struck a chord with me. He will know that Northern Ireland is one of the areas where the contract has not received the same level of interest that it has in other areas, so clearly we have more work to do there. I will certainly bear his points in mind.

The hon. Gentleman also spoke about the opportunity for oversight of complaints and how to monitor complaint resolution—that is a key issue that several other hon. Members referred to. Of course the preference must always be for a service provider—the body delivering on the ground—to deal with complaints from service users promptly and adequately in the first instance. However, I recognise that that does not always happen, and of course escalation routes exist and will continue to exist—ultimately to UK Visas and Immigration—and I am very keen that complaints should be raised and addressed with the utmost efficiency and speed. I have heard some horror stories from hon. Members this afternoon, which we would certainly not wish anyone, let alone one’s own child, to experience. That was particularly true of the comments about vermin and cockroaches. Of course those things are not acceptable and we do not wish them to happen now, let alone under the new contracts.

I will not give way to the hon. Member for Manchester, Gorton (Afzal Khan), because he made a point I wish to address about the length of contracts and whether they are set in stone for 10 years. There is a break at seven years, at which point we would be able to address the—[Interruption.] Well, the current contract is seven years as well, and that will give us the opportunity to review matters, should we need to do so.

Several hon. Members rose—

Caroline Nokes: I will give way to the hon. Member for Stockton North, who secured the debate.

Alex Cunningham: In the light of what the Minister has just said, seven years is still a hell of a long time. Will she take that point back and think again about it, and see whether we could perhaps have breaks at three years or five years?
Caroline Nokes: I thank the hon. Gentleman for making that point; I will certainly think about it.

On break clauses, there are indeed mechanisms within the contracts being proposed to ensure that any changes that the Home Office wishes to make in the future can be enacted appropriately, so these are not contracts that are set in stone for a 10-year period. As I said, there is a break clause at seven years, but we will also have the opportunity to make changes that we may need to make.

Afzal Khan: I thank the Minister for giving way. I have two very simple questions for her. First, can she tell us what significant improvements there will be in the new contracts? Secondly, can she say whether there will be any penalties for any breach of contract or poor performance?

Caroline Nokes: I thank the hon. Gentleman for that intervention. I am conscious that I only have a couple of minutes left and I was hoping to move on to the bits of my prepared speech that actually include those points.

Alongside the Ministry of Housing, Communities and Local Government, we continue to explore how central and local government can work better together to enable us to meet our international commitments and to let service providers, local partners and civil society play their part. We are currently working with a number of local authorities to develop a place-based approach to asylum and resettlement, and considering how closer working and greater collaboration could work in practice.

As I have said, I have met many local authorities and the devolved Governments, but we are determined to improve standards and will stipulate more standardisation in the initial accommodation estate. That will ensure that there are dedicated areas for women and families, and more adapted rooms for those with specific needs, including pregnant women.

The new contracts will improve service-user orientation, to help service users to live in their communities and access local services. There will be better data-sharing with relevant agencies, to better join people to those services. The new contracts will also focus on safeguarding and improvements to support—

Stuart C. McDonald: Will the Minister give way?

Caroline Nokes: I am sorry; I have got one minute left.
Universal Credit Split Payments

[Geraint Davies in the Chair]

4 pm

Danielle Rowley (Midlothian) (Lab): I beg to move,

That this House has considered universal credit split payments.

It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Mr Davies. Universal credit has been slammed by charities, experts, politicians from both sides of the House, and—most importantly—people living and suffering in the system. Just today, we heard from former Prime Minister Gordon Brown about the failures of universal credit and how it pushes more people into poverty, but today I want to focus on automatic split payments.

I firmly believe that it is a matter of human rights for all women—for all people—to be entitled to financial independence. The Equality and Human Rights Commission agrees, but the Government do not seem to. This year, I met the Employment Minister, the hon. Member for Reading West (Alok Sharma), to talk about universal credit. In that meeting, I asked him about automatic split payments, but I was told they were not going to happen. I was disappointed by that response, which is why I am glad to have secured today’s debate to raise the issue and add the voices of some of the people I have been speaking to. I hope that I will get some answers from the Minister and that he will take away some of the issues that I raise.

First, as I said, I believe that this is a human rights issue. When couples work, they do not get their wages paid into a single account, so why should welfare payments be any different? It seems like an oddly backward system. Under the current system, universal credit payments for a household are paid into a single bank account or joint account. Recipients of the joint award are required to nominate who receives that payment at the outset of the claim. For much of this debate, I will refer to women being able to have financial independence, but of course the policy will affect men too. The policy is not that the man automatically receives the payment; however, it will mainly affect women, which is why most of my comments will refer to women.

A report by the Scottish charity Engender pointed out that the policy“does not account for the fact that financial decision-making takes place within the context of gendered power dynamics. The majority of jointly awarded ‘out of work’ benefits are claimed by men and assumptions that couples own, access and control joint banks accounts on an equal basis are unfounded.”

Jim Shannon (Strangford) (DUP): I congratulate the hon. Lady on securing the debate. Universal credit was rolled out in my constituency in September, so it is fresh to us. My staff went on a reminder course to learn how to do it, and one of the key issues that has come up is the very issue that the hon. Lady has brought forward. We are new to universal credit, but split payments—are simply a must. Does the hon. Lady agree that rather than having to apply for a legal power of attorney, we need the Minister’s Department to apply discretion in allowing split payments to be part of the system? They have to be part of the system; if not, it is unfair.

Danielle Rowley: I thank the hon. Gentleman for his comments. That issue came up at a roundtable to discuss universal credit that I held in my constituency earlier this year. It brought together charities, local groups and service users to talk about their experience. In my constituency, full service universal credit has been rolled out since March 2017. At the roundtable, the need for automatic split payments was highlighted as a clear and prominent issue that has been impacting the lives of survivors of domestic abuse. Attendees of the roundtable, as well as respected organisations and groups, have stated that a single household payment has been shown to be highly problematic for a number of reasons, the first of which is that it perpetuates and contributes to inequality. Engender stated:

“Payment...to one partner in a couple is likely to result in less equal relationships, with one individual less able to access income.”

Again, this applies especially to women, as women are more likely to be economically dependent, to hold caring roles and to be subject to financial and other abuse.

That brings me to the heart of this issue, which is that single household payments facilitate economic abuse, where a person is deprived of financial independence. I pay tribute to the work of the Work and Pensions Committee on this issue. Evidence submitted by Scottish Women’s Aid and Engender to that Committee’s investigation into universal credit and domestic abuse stated:

“The single household payment is a gift to perpetrators of domestic abuse as it rapidly facilitates and legitimises what may previously have taken months or years of coercive control to achieve.”

That is disgraceful. It is shocking and deeply concerning that Government policy can be making it easier for abusers. What makes it worse is that single payments can then act as a barrier to survivors leaving abusive relationships.

Louise Haigh (Sheffield, Heeley) (Lab): My hon. Friend is making such a powerful speech. For those who are watching this debate, and for Members with concerns on both sides of the House, it is baffling that the Government are continuing with a policy that will encourage further economic abuse and encourage victims of domestic abuse to stay with their partner. I congratulate my hon. Friend on securing such an important debate.

Danielle Rowley: My hon. Friend is absolutely right: being financially dependent can make it very difficult to leave a relationship, even just on the basic levels of affording transport and accommodation. A local case—one of the first cases I dealt with when I was elected—was that of a woman who was trying to leave an abusive partner. She had three children, one of them very young, and she came to me and said, “I don’t know what to do. My welfare payments are paid into my partner’s account, and I can’t leave. I’m now faced with a choice between staying, and subjecting not just myself but my children to this abuse, or leaving, making myself and my children homeless and unable to afford accommodation.” It cannot be Government policy to force people into that terrible position.

Chris Stephens (Glasgow South West) (SNP): The hon. Lady is making an excellent speech. As someone who sits on the Work and Pensions Committee, know...
that the—evidence we received was shocking. Is the hon. Lady as disappointed as I am that the Select Committee’s eighth recommendation—that “where claimants have dependent children, the entire UC payment should be made to the main carer by default”—appears to be getting rejected in the Government’s response?

Danielle Rowley: I thank the hon. Gentleman for his intervention. I absolutely agree with him, and I will give some of my own thoughts on the Government’s response to that as well.

Debbie Abrahams (Oldham East and Saddleworth) (Lab): My hon. Friend is making a powerful speech. I am sure the Minister will respond by saying that people can apply to have split payments, but Women’s Aid has said that this is not enough—that the Government are not, for example, monitoring how many people are applying and how many people are being refused. The record of what is being provided for in terms of alternative payments gives a very skewed and false picture, and we must have a default split payment soon.

Danielle Rowley: I absolutely agree.

Dr Philippa Whitford (Central Ayrshire) (SNP): Will the hon. Lady give way?

Danielle Rowley: I will make some progress, if that is okay.

As I said earlier, I met the Employment Minister and talked about this issue, and he assured me that one can request a split payment. He even boasted that the system is designed so that a person will not be informed that their partner has made a request for a split payment, but I imagine most people will notice if an amount of money is missing from their bank account when the payment comes in. That just shows that the policy has not been designed with any thought to those in abusive relationships, and that the Government do not understand what life may be like for someone in such a relationship.

Dr Whitford: The Women’s Aid survey showed that 85% of abuse survivors would not dare apply. That is why having it as the default is so important. Long before women reach the point of leaving a home, they have no money in their purse to go for coffee with friends or to go out with family, and they become isolated. Nobody is around them to offer a bed or advice. That is the start of it.

Danielle Rowley: I thank the hon. Lady for her comment. Absolutely—there is a whole host of reasons a woman might not be able to request it, and the Government seem unable to grasp that.

Under the system, survivors of domestic abuse are required to request split payments—a process that might put them at greater risk of further abuse, which is clearly preventing requests. Women, often accompanied to appointments by abusive partners, will fear repercussions when the abuser notices a change in the payment amount.

The Department has said to the Select Committee that it recognises the risk that requesting split payments poses to those experiencing domestic abuse, but it has made no significant moves to rectify the problem.

Helen Hayes (Dulwich and West Norwood) (Lab): I thank my hon. Friend for the powerful speech she is making. Does she agree that the Government are being derelict in their duty to keep women safe if they put any hurdles in the way that could put women at greater risk? This is one such hurdle, and the Government must get rid of it.

Danielle Rowley: I absolutely agree, and I hope that the Government listen to that important point.

Although clearly detached from reality, it was somewhat unsurprising that, when I spoke to him, the Employment Minister believed that there was no problem with having to request split payments. That is because the Department has not been collecting the data needed to identify the issues surrounding domestic abuse and universal credit. It has only recently finally started publishing statistics on the number of households that request split payments, although it still does not require any information on why people request them.

When I asked for statistics on the number of people experiencing domestic abuse who are on universal credit, I was informed that that information is not available. Without the relevant data, the Department cannot ensure that people are effectively supported. The Work and Pensions Committee report states:

“the lack of data on split payment requests and abuse disclosure means there is no systematic way of understanding, identifying or disproving any relationship between financial abuse and UC.”

How can we help people when we do not have the data to work on?

The Government response to that report, which I believe is being published today, states support for the recommendation to prioritise gathering and publishing data on abuse and split payments, including the reasons for requests for split payments, so they seem to agree with it. Yet the Government also state later in the document that

“providing data on the reasons for split payments is not something the Department is currently considering as we need to consider sensitivities and protecting our claimants as a priority”.

That just sounds like an excuse for not collecting the data, as there are many ways of collecting it in an appropriate and sensitive manner that ensure that the claimant’s data is protected.

Of course, as a Scottish MP, I have to talk about the situation in Scotland. The case for automatic split payments is so compelling that earlier this year we won the argument on the need for split payments in Scotland. Thanks to the hard work of Scottish Labour, all parties, including the Scottish Conservatives, supported my colleague Mark Griffin’s amendment to the Social Security (Scotland) Act 2018, securing a change in the law. As such, the Scottish Government have committed to use their powers to split payments automatically. Given that the Scottish Tories supported automatic split payments in Holyrood, Conservative party policy appears to be confused. The Scottish Tories have seemingly failed to influence their party on this harmful policy. That is disappointing and weak, and it shows how little power they hold.

Looking at the practicalities, now that the Scottish Government have committed to automatic splitting of universal credit payments, the Department, which retains the practical responsibility to implement split payments through its automated digital payment system, must
work with the Scottish Government, as well as relevant civil society organisations, to ensure that the decision is appropriately implemented. It needs to do that quickly and positively, scoping out and agreeing different forms of trial and of splitting the payment.

Mr Paul Sweeney (Glasgow North East) (Lab/Co-op): My hon. Friend is making an incredibly powerful speech on the compelling case for split payments. As she says, the system being rolled out in Scotland defaults to split payments. If that infrastructure is available, surely it would make absolute economic and financial sense to scale it up to a UK level.

Danielle Rowley: I thank my hon. Friend for his point.

I welcome the Government’s support for the Select Committee’s recommendation that they view the introduction of split payments in Scotland as an opportunity to learn about carrying out such a system. However, there is very little detail in the Government’s response about how they plan to do so. There is no mention of carrying out the evaluation recommended by the Select Committee report. The Government’s response states that they will implement the policy on the Scottish Government’s behalf “when it is feasible to do so”, but sets out no detail of the current plans and timelines.

I would like the Minister to answer the following questions. What is the Department’s timetable? Have the Scottish Government proposed a possible split formula? Have they told the Department that they are preparing prospective regulations, and has it been consulted on them? For the sake of women across the UK, the Government need to follow Scotland’s example and agree to adopt automatic split payments UK-wide. The recommendation is to view the introduction of split payments in Scotland as an opportunity to further consider whether, on the basis of evidence, there is a case for splitting payments by default in the rest of the UK. I suspect that, if such an evaluation is undertaken, the evidence in support of split payments will be, as it was in Scotland, overwhelming. However, it could be a lengthy process and, for many women, it would be just too long.

In the meantime, given figures released last month that showed that just 15 out of 880,000 households benefit from split payments—I was shocked when I heard that figure—what is the Department doing to better promote the option of split payments and to reduce the associated risks of opting for it? The Government have taken an important step recently, acknowledging economic abuse as significant by proposing to include it in a statutory definition of domestic abuse for the first time, but how does that fit with the wider Department’s policy on split payments, which supports economic and wider domestic abuse? Is the policy in contravention of the Government’s own position on domestic abuse? Can the Minister also please tell me, in the light of the draft Domestic Abuse Bill, what discussions have been had on split payments?

Automatic split payments will not prevent abuse altogether in households claiming universal credit. Some abusers will find a way to control their partners regardless, but automatic split payments are a significant step to ensuring that the state is not implementing a policy that plays into the hands of abusers, strengthening their hand and giving them more power than they already have over victims and survivors of domestic abuse.

Currently, universal credit is paid as a single household payment. It poses a risk to women’s financial independence, autonomy and security, and generally stands in the way of a person’s right to financial independence. The Department and the Government have a duty to ensure that they are providing the right support to survivors of abuse, and currently they are failing in that duty. The availability of the option of split payments is clearly not sufficient. To avoid supporting domestic abuse, split payments need to be a default—an automatic way to prevent abuse.

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Work and Pensions (Justin Tomlinson): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Mr Davies. I pay tribute to the hon. Member for Midlothian (Danielle Rowley), who has been a long-standing campaigner in this area through parliamentary questions; meeting the Minister for Employment, who has overall responsibility for universal credit; and visits to her local Jobcentre Plus, where she has also met supporting organisations. I know it is an area in which she has a long-standing track record of campaigning.

I share that passion. For many years I have supported my local women’s refuge. I have also worked with Women’s Aid, hosting parliamentary events prior to my ministerial appointment. I was very briefly on the Work and Pensions Committee, so I was present when they were considering the report, although I did not contribute to it because I was not there during the hearings. I pay tribute to my former colleagues on the Committee who were really engaged with this incredibly important topic.

Ruth George (High Peak) (Lab): Will the Minister give way?

Justin Tomlinson: I will take a few interventions, but I am conscious that I do not have too much time.

Ruth George: The Minister heard the powerful evidence taken by the Select Committee, of which I am a member. I am interested in how, having heard that evidence on the impact on women and, in particular, on children, he can justify the Government response to the recommendation that if a payment cannot be split it should go to the main carer by default.

Justin Tomlinson: I was not present when that evidence was given, just when the Committee was considering it, but I will cover many of those points as I proceed.

With respect to domestic abuse, we are covering physical, sexual, psychological, emotional and financial abuse, and controlling and coercive behaviour. We are particularly looking at economic abuse. We all agree that the solution to domestic violence is complex and should ultimately be delivered through the judicial system, but the Department has an incredibly important role, not just through UC but through the wider work of the Government. The Government are fully committed to taking the issue very seriously, and I expect that to have full cross-party support. The Department will continue to feed into progress towards the domestic violence and
Justin Tomlinson: I represent the Department on the inter-ministerial group on violence against women and girls, and we regularly work with key stakeholders such as Women's Aid, Refuge and the ManKind Initiative—I shall give more details on that work as I proceed.

I was particularly touched by the case that the hon. Member for Midlothian raised. Today I met representatives of Women's Aid and Refuge to talk specifically about the journey in the jobcentre process. It is now mandatory for all work coaches to have training to recognise and identify victims of domestic abuse and those at risk, and to offer support, which can include signposting to national partnership organisations such as Refuge and Women's Aid, but also to local organisations—every town is different. That approach relies on people being willing to be referred, but they are offered that menu of signposting options.

In her case study, the hon. Lady mentioned financial barriers to people leaving their household. The hon. Member for Sheffield, Heeley (Louise Haigh) said in an intervention that it would be totally unacceptable for the Government to put up a barrier. That is a really key point, so we ensure that people who wish to leave their household can be put immediately on the universal credit single payment in their own right. If they are already on a legacy housing benefit, they will get two weeks of additional housing benefit money up front, to give them immediate cash. While they are there, they will also have 100% access to the advance payment on day one, as well as the signposting.

We do not encourage people to stay in such a household, so we put a big emphasis on partnership working and on talking to those with expertise in the area. However, those who do wish to stay, for whatever reason, can request split payments. The hon. Member for Midlothian cited a figure of 15 households, but the figure is actually 20. At the moment, the majority of people going through UC are single claimants, so it is not an exact science, but we will continue to look at the statistics. I take the point that the data is limited; it tells us whether people are already on a legacy housing benefit, they will get two weeks of additional housing benefit money up front, to give them immediate cash. While they are there, they will also have 100% access to the advance payment on day one, as well as the signposting.

On financial support, if someone has financial housing commitments such as rent or a mortgage for their existing household, we can, in effect, make double payments of housing benefit for up to 26 weeks automatically, or up to 52 weeks at discretion. Again, we are doing everything we can to remove the financial barrier to people moving away from their household.

Jess Phillips (Birmingham, Yardley) (Lab): Will the Minister give way?

Justin Tomlinson: This will have to be the last intervention, because I have a lot to say and not long to say it, and I do not want to be criticised for missing things.

Jess Phillips: I just wonder what the jobcentre will do when it discovers, as we have all done, that those local partnerships lead to a dead end because the services are no longer there.
I am conscious of time, so let me address the specific point about split payments. I welcome the fact that Scotland wishes to try them. As it stands, anybody who is a victim of domestic abuse can be given a split payment. I accept the point that there are then challenges—not unreasonably, the hon. Member for Midlothian said that the current recipient would notice that it was potentially half of the income. We need to look at Scotland because we have to learn from the test and look at the unintended consequences.

Those groups that campaigned for a split payment do not agree on how to split it. It is not the case that everybody would simply do it 50:50. If the state arbitrarily says that somebody should have 70% and somebody else should have 30%, that could have unintended consequences. That may not mean that it is not the right way to do it, but it is why we have committed to give support to the Scottish Parliament to do its pilot. The pilot will cover a sufficiently large area for us to draw good information from it and decide whether split payments are the way to go or whether—because of unintended consequences, and despite the good intentions—they are not.

The answer to the specific question of whether the Scottish Government have introduced suggestions on how to do split payments or a plan for legislation is, “Absolutely not.” I suspect, in their defence, that that is because the issue of how the payments are split is so complex. However, they will get our full support to make whatever they do work. Just to be clear, the principle of having household income is not new to UC; it has been the case for legacy benefits since the dawn of time. That does not mean that it is not the right way to do it, but it is why we have committed to give support to the Scottish Parliament to do its pilot. The pilot will cover a sufficiently large area for us to draw good information from it and decide whether split payments are the way to go or whether—because of unintended consequences, and despite the good intentions—they are not.

Dr Whitford: Will the Minister give way?

Justin Tomlinson: No, because I have only one minute left.

It is a shame that this debate was not a longer one in which hon. Members could have expanded on the points they made today in interventions. However, there is a real commitment from me as the Minister that we will work with the experts and the Scottish Government to see whether lessons can be learned from their pilot. In the immediate future, we are looking at what will happen and what we can do to identify and support those who are in danger of domestic abuse or are current victims of it, so that we can do our bit. It is an issue that the Government take very seriously and will continue to push, not just in this area but through the forthcoming domestic abuse Bill. I pay tribute to the hon. Member for Midlothian, who has been a dedicated worker in this area.

Question put and agreed to.

Economic Growth: East of England

4.30 pm

Peter Aldous (Waveney) (Con): I beg to move, That this House has considered promoting economic growth in the East of England.

It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Mr Davies. The purpose of this debate is to highlight the enormous economic potential of the east of England and to put forward proposals for promoting growth, which can benefit people right across the region. In the past, East Anglians have perhaps been slow to come forward. We have hidden our light under a bushel, and thus the region has not secured the investment in infrastructure that is needed to transform what is already a highly successful economic region into a global leader. It is important that we now cast aside such shyness.

As we look beyond Brexit, the UK must strive to be the leader in a variety of fields. The east of England can help secure this goal, whether it is in the clean energy, agri-food, life sciences or information and communications technology sectors. The catalyst for this debate was the formation last December of the east of England all-party parliamentary group, which the hon. Member for Cambridge (Daniel Zeichner) and I co-chair, and which last month launched its Budget submission, “Building together the foundations of more productivity, prosperity and inclusivity in the East of England”. Much of what I will say is based on the proposals set out in that publication.

What is the east of England? In some respects, it is an area without boundaries. It includes the counties of Suffolk and Norfolk as well as Cambridgeshire and what used to be Huntingdonshire, and it extends to parts of Essex and Hertfordshire, though owing to the post-war growth of London, it does not reach as far south as it used to. From the Minister’s perspective, I fear it does not include Watford—its inclusion would enable the region to claim a premiership football team, as the Town and the Canaries currently flounder.

The region is relatively flat—it is often described as the bread bowl of England—and made up of attractive villages and countryside, interspersed with popular market towns and larger towns and cities such as Cambridge, Norwich, Ipswich, Colchester, Peterborough and, on its southern boundaries, Chelmsford.

James Cartledge (South Suffolk) (Con): My hon. Friend is a fine bastion of our region and I congratulate him on securing this debate. The east of England is beautiful, but if we want to encourage tourism, people have to be able to get there. Does he agree that one of the fundamental challenges is our rail network in the eastern region?

Peter Aldous: My hon. Friend is spot on: infrastructure and communications, whether road, railway or digital, are hugely important to the region’s future. I shall briefly touch on that, and I am quite sure my colleagues will do likewise.

The east of England APPG held its inaugural meeting on 13 December 2017, when we were addressed by Lord Heseltine, who emphasised the need to think strategically and to consider how best to manage and spread economic growth across the whole region for the benefit of all people. The Budget submission has been
supported and endorsed not just by MPs, but by business, local government and local enterprise partnerships. Signatories include British Sugar, Stansted Airport, AstraZeneca, Anglian Water, James Palmer, who is the Mayor of Cambridgeshire and Peterborough, the Haven Gateway Partnership, the New Anglia local enterprise partnership, the Hertfordshire local enterprise partnership and the East of England Local Government Association.

In arriving at our recommendations, we held evidence sessions and considered a range of innovative ideas as to how to promote and sustain economic growth, including proposals from Lord Adonis; Councillor David Finch, who is the leader of Essex County Council; and Mayor James Palmer, who is working up plans for much-needed infrastructure improvements through land value capture. The recommendations that we are putting forward should be regarded not as a wish list, but instead as a new way of working and getting things done—business and Government, both national and local, working together to secure investment that ensures the whole of the east of England realises its full potential.

It is important to highlight the enormous economic potential in the east of England. We are one of the fastest-growing regions, in terms of both population and economy. With a population of 6.1 million, the region is growing rapidly at a pace that is second only to London. In 2016, the east of England was one of just three UK regions to contribute more in tax than it received in public moneys. Despite this, public expenditure in the region was £8,155 per capita in 2017, which is less than the UK average of £9,159.

We are a frontrunner in attracting business. In 2017, the east of England saw the largest increase in business numbers of all UK regions. We are at the forefront of global excellence in innovation. The region is a centre for nationally and internationally recognised expertise in sectors such as life sciences, ICT, agri-tech and low-carbon energy supply. The corridor from Cambridge to Milton Keynes and Oxford has the potential to be the UK’s Silicon Valley. We are a jobs powerhouse—total employment is expected to rise by 7% over the next 15 years—and we complement and enhance the position of London as a world city.

Significant investment is already taking place in the east of England. By 2020, all trains in the area served by Greater Anglia will be brand-new, not second-hand hand-me-downs from other regions. Some £1.5 billion is being spent on removing what is probably the worst road bottleneck in the whole country: the A14 between Huntingdon and Cambridge. A further £300 million is being spent on schemes along the A47 from Peterborough to Lowestoft. The Norwich northern distributor road is open, and vital new bridges are being built in Great Yarmouth and Lowestoft—the latter is in my constituency.

There is a need to join up the dots and to think strategically, so that the whole region can benefit from those investments. There are also challenges that are best met at regional level, such as climate change and water resource management. We are not only a very dry region but a low-lying one, with a coast where the battle with rising sea levels has been raging for millennia. The recommendations in the APPG report provide the foundations to promote growth in three areas: transport, infrastructure and industrial strategy. I shall briefly go through them.

With regard to transport, we recommend that the “Government should support England’s Economic Heartland and Transport East—the region’s two sub-national transport bodies—to become statutory bodies.”

By doing so, we will be better able to prioritise, fund and then deliver road, rail and air transport improvements.

On infrastructure, “councils should have greater discretionary powers to encourage housing delivery...Further action is recommended to free-up finances to build affordable homes at scale” through a variety of measures, including “relaxing Housing Revenue Account borrowing...Ministers should explore innovative funding options that could help deliver infrastructure to enable new housing, either by direct council investment or by leveraging in other funding...Government should facilitate greater cooperation between developers, infrastructure providers, and local planning authority providers to improve housing delivery.”

The importance of digital connectivity cannot be overestimated. The need for a full fibre network to all homes and businesses across the whole region is incredibly important. It is an absolute must, if the region is to compete globally post Brexit. If necessary, greater powers should be granted to Ofcom to ensure that commercial operators do not just concentrate on the larger urban areas.

With regard to our regional industrial strategy, we should be focusing on our flagship industries: life sciences, agri-tech, ICT and clean energy. If necessary, Ofcom should be granted greater powers to ensure that commercial operators do not concentrate just on the larger urban areas. Our regional industrial strategy should tackle the productivity gap, which is a particular problem for the region. The local enterprise partnerships are key to developing and enacting an effective industrial strategy for the region, because local private and public sector leaders best understand the region’s opportunities and challenges and are best placed to co-ordinate the promotion of the various sectors to ensure consistency. The education strategy should focus on helping local people to develop transferrable and adaptable skills.

I have sought to provide a framework, albeit in an outline form, for promoting and spreading growth across the east of England. There is a great deal of flesh to put on the bones, and I anticipate that colleagues will do that by highlighting the opportunities and constraints in their areas. Now is only the beginning of this campaign. There are many proposals in the APPG’s report, and they deserve careful thought and implementation. I ask the Minister to signpost the roadmap that we need to go down to ensure that the east of England is a global leader and that we enhance productivity and increase prosperity for all those who live and work there.

4.41 pm

Daniel Zeichner (Cambridge) (Lab): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Mr Davies. I congratulate the hon. Member for Waveney (Peter Aldous) on securing the debate. We only chair the all-party group, and he has excellently described the work it has done since it was inaugurated just over a year ago. It is truly cross-party. Although the issue of what defines the east is sometimes
a matter for debate, I strongly believe that, given that sub-national transport bodies are emerging in other parts of the country, as well as in our own region, it is in our very best interests to work together in the east. That is particularly important, given its geographical proximity to London. Although the east is, by many measures, an affluent area, if the wealth generated by people commuting to London is taken out, the figures suddenly reflect what we actually see on the ground in much of the region: in many places, for many people, life is a daily struggle. I will use the old six-county definition of the east, which many of us still hold dear.

The east is indeed a net contributor to the UK economy and the Treasury, and its industries are world-leading. In my constituency of Cambridge, we have life sciences and tech—I do not need to rehearse the arguments. However, the region is not without its challenges, which were outlined very effectively in the Budget submission. There is a need for more housing, given that so many are priced out of it. Just last week, it was shown that my city of Cambridge is one of the most expensive places for young people in the ratio between income and rent, and buying is almost out of the question for most people. The need for improved transport and infrastructure is well known. We also have a future skills deficit, which risks causing employment growth to slow and eventually to reverse—and, indeed, possibly worse than that.

Those issues are very well explained in the Cambridgeshire and Peterborough independent economic review, which the Business Secretary and the Mayor of the combined authority launched in London yesterday. It was produced by a high-powered commission chaired by Dame Kate Barker, and its high-powered and knowledgeable commissioners include Lord Willetts by Dame Kate Barker, and its high-powered and knowledgeable commissioners include Lord Willetts and Stanned from Cambridge. I hope Ministers will look closely at its work.

The review points out that, without the right tools to tackle these issues, employment growth in Cambridge could level off in the next couple of years, and there is the risk that it will go into reverse after 2031. Most people would find it surprising to learn that there is a danger that big businesses in the area may have to move away. The review’s conclusions are clear: future prosperity is not guaranteed, and if action on transport, housing, infrastructure and skills is not taken soon, there will be adverse effects not just for Cambridge or for Cambridgeshire and Peterborough, but for the wider region and the whole of the UK economy.

The review rightly highlights the need to spread wealth more fairly and protect all that makes areas such as Cambridge so special for people. That is a very important point. It is about not just the traditional measure of growth—just more—but doing things better, being more productive and improving the quality of life for everyone. Our skilled workforce has been the driving factor in Cambridgeshire’s success in recent years, but given that our future relationship with the EU is uncertain, a failure to make the right investment in skills and infrastructure could cause internationally focused businesses to look elsewhere.

I have inevitably emphasised Cambridge so far, but those lessons hold good for much of the rest of the region. I believe that cities will be the driver within the region, but their relationship with the rural—or, perhaps more accurately, semi-rural—areas and market towns is vital. Skills and labour will be essential in our future relationship with the EU, not least because the agricultural sector relies so heavily on seasonal workers.

Transport is a huge issue, of course. The BBC’s Andrew Sinclair recently pointed out that it can take as long to travel the 110 miles from Norwich to London as the 220 miles from London to Liverpool. We desperately need to unlock transport infrastructure across our region to improve our productivity.

There are things we can do. For instance, I am told that digital signalling on our rail network would cost about £1 billion, but the benefits to quality of life and increased productivity would pay that sum back many times over. It does not require building new lines and upsetting people all over the place; it is about using the existing capacity better. It is the same message again: we should improve productivity, not just of people but of assets. If we can improve our links from places such as Cambridge though Stansted to London, we will create vital connections to the wider world.

Although our councils are struggling horribly with underfunding at the moment—it is frankly a disgrace that Cambridgeshire County Council has been reduced to seeking staff to take unpaid leave at Christmas—our ask is slightly unique, in that it is not always for more funds. We want the means to raise our own revenue. I used my first speech in the House three and a half years ago to speak not about glamorous issues but about the slightly arcane subject of tax increment financing. That and land value capture, which the Mayor of the combined authority has argued for, could unlock the investment needed. It would not cost the Treasury. We are prepared to take on the risk. The benefit sharing scheme got so close to being approved by the Treasury, but it was killed. We just need the authority and the tools to get on with the job—to borrow a phrase—of opening up access to jobs, skills and housing.

The east is a region with enormous potential, but we are reaching the point at which business as usual is not enough. Future prosperity has to be earned, but it also has to be shared fairly. Many in the east are up for the challenge, but we need the Government to work with us.
Before I touch on agriculture, food and drink, infrastructure—particularly the A12 and rail, which I am sure my right hon. Friend the Member for Witham (Priti Patel) will talk about later—and the importance of looking after the public sector at a time when we are seeing private sector growth in the east, it is important to reflect on the fact that unemployment in our region has come down over the past 10 years. Youth unemployment is at lows that we have not seen for more than 20 years—particularly in my part of Suffolk—and we are seeing more vocational training and apprenticeships. Those are all good things. We can also note that average wages across the east of England, particularly in Suffolk, are above the UK mean and median, which means that we live in a relatively affluent part of the country. There are still pockets of deprivation, as we are all aware, such as those in Lowestoft and Ipswich, which need particular attention.

Agriculture, food and drink is one of the drivers of the economies of Norfolk and Suffolk, and of parts of Cambridgeshire and north Essex. There are many national names in our counties that contribute to the UK economy. They are names that we can be proud of, such as Gressingham Duck, Aspall Cyder and Adnams brewery, to name but a few. However, our agricultural sector needs additional support from the Government for the development of land-based college training so that young people have opportunities in agriculture, food and drink. One area that I ask the Minister to look at is vocational training. Throughout the region, there has been a tremendous expansion in vocational training in agriculture, food and drink, particularly in light manufacturing, and we can be very proud of that. It is the driver of our economy, particularly in Norfolk and Suffolk, but we need more support for our land-based training colleges, such as Easton and Otley College, which can provide the next generation of agricultural and land-based apprentices, farm workers and people working in the food and drink industry that is so important to our region.

We recognise that the east of England—Suffolk in particular—has benefited from considerable Government support for infrastructure. We have support for the third crossing in Lowestoft that my hon. Friend the Member for Waveney (Peter Aldous) for securing this important debate. It is a pleasure to stand here and discuss how we can promote economic growth across the east of England. Clearly that is one of my priorities as the Member for Clacton—a place my hon. Friend probably only inadvertently left off his list of great towns of the east.

Nationally, our economy is growing. At last, we are beginning to say goodbye to austerity and are getting the country back on track. However, while national economic growth is without doubt welcome, some communities are being left behind. One such community is my constituency of Clacton. As we begin to discuss the future of our economy, we must ensure that no community is left behind. I was encouraged to hear the Prime Minister argue the same in her conference speech last week.

I am here today to offer my thoughts on how we can be more inclusive as the economy grows. By way of further context, in 2013 my local authority, Tendring District Council, published an excellent economic development strategy. But in its pages was the somewhat troubling assertion:

“While there are some excellent businesses and highly resourceful residents locally, the district’s economy is not performing as well as it could—employment, job numbers and business formation have...been static or shrinking in recent years.”

In a former life as the cabinet member for regeneration and inward investment at Tendring District Council, I saw at first hand how eager our council officers were to correct that situation. I also saw how support for businesses...
can pay tremendous dividends in terms of economic growth. As I have said in previous speeches on the economy, in that role I prided myself on being able to make cash grants of up to £150,000 available to businesses in, and coming to, Tendring, so that they could grow, flourish and create inward investment. Many businesses did flourish thanks to that funding from the SME growth fund, which I introduced—businesses such as Nantmor Blinds, based in Clacton-on-Sea, which received a grant to assist with the purchase of an auto louvre machine. It also enabled it to hire new staff. In its own words, Nantmor Blinds said it was “blown away by Tendring District Council’s hard work and determination.”

To date, the SME growth fund in Tendring has supported businesses, created 20 full-time jobs and leveraged over £200,000 of private investment into the district. I am delighted to say that, thanks to that success, the scheme is being widened and extended to 2020.

Clearly, in my area local government support is truly there for businesses. I have no doubt that that is the case across the east of England. We must ensure that that continues and expands to national support. Nevertheless, and despite our enthusiasm, something continues to prevent businesses from really committing themselves, and the prosperity they bring, to Tendring. That obstacle, which has been mentioned before and will be mentioned again and again, is the quality of our local infrastructure. In my view, a country’s economy will only ever be as good as its roads, rails and ports, and we are no exception in that regard. I have often argued in this place—some might say far too often—that there is a need to improve the connection to overlooked areas such as the Clacton constituency. As a regular commuter myself, I know that it takes far too long for my constituents to travel to the capital and vice versa. I have said it before and I will say it again: the 69-mile journey often takes the best part of one hour and 40 minutes—that is nonsense. Without more investment in our local transport infrastructure, I believe that we will limit the incentive for people and businesses to move to our area. That would mean that my district would continue to be excluded from the strong national economic growth, which is an unacceptable outcome.

Moreover, as I have said before, if we are to do our bit to tackle the housing crisis, we must improve our transport infrastructure before any major new housing developments break ground. We are leading the way with our garden community developments. We simply cannot build more dwellings without first making it easy to occupy, live in and work from them. Investing more in transport would do that.

That is why I will continue to push my “70 in 60” campaign at every opportunity. It aims for the people of Clacton to be able to cover the nearly 70 miles to London in less than 60 minutes, which is not an unrealistic proposition when we look at similar rail services in the area. For example, commuters to Ipswich cover the journey in about 70 minutes, and let us not forget that people can travel the 52 miles from London to Colchester in 58 minutes, only to crawl the final 18 miles to Clacton in about an hour—on a good day. That clearly has a lot to do with the quality of infrastructure between Colchester and Clacton, compared with the main line to Ipswich, so we should change that.

When we commit cash to infrastructure in such a way, businesses get excited and want to invest, thereby laying the foundations for future economic growth, and I have been shown that clearly by my past experience and conversations I have had as the Member of Parliament for Clacton. If we are to promote economic growth in the east of England, we must adopt the “infrastructure first” mantra everywhere and ensure that our region has the best transport links going.

I therefore welcome the formation of Transport East, a forum that now meets regularly. It will be the vehicle for the delivery of a collective vision for transport and wider infrastructure for all communities in the east of England. Its formation is certainly a positive step. It will lead to the creation of a truly joined-up transport network that does not exclude any of our communities from infrastructure improvements, which are a precursor of economic growth. The forum will also help us to secure vital investment in future infrastructure. I encourage the Government to engage with Transport East in whatever way they can.

To turn to the roads, I ask the Government to look favourably on the application for RIS2—second road investment strategy—funding for the new A120, which will reduce pressure on existing roads used by residents of the Clacton constituency. Improving that road, which runs across the east of England from Stansted airport to Harwich, would also help move goods more quickly and deliver a boost to the local economy. Furthermore, upgrading that strategically important road is an essential precursor to further unlocking Essex’s economic potential, along with the wider east of England region.

That brings me back to the point of the debate. The east of England is a unique region, with strong economic growth prospects, thanks to places such as Cambridge, Peterborough, Ipswich, Stansted airport, Luton airport, Harwich and Felixstowe, Colchester, Waveney, Southend-on-Sea and, of course, the sunshine coast of the Clacton constituency—I get them all in. However, if we do not have first-rate infrastructure, and cannot successfully and efficiently link those economic sub-units together, we will not get the best out of the east of England. We will therefore not maximise our economic potential, and certain communities will continue to be left behind.

To conclude, I return to the economic development strategy to which I referred earlier. Despite the troubling conclusions drawn about Tendring in 2013, it was also argued that the area has the potential for growth which could create thousands of jobs. Good will and hard work from our council has allowed us to start unlocking that potential, and I am proud of our record so far. Real and sustained investment in our infrastructure, however, would allow us to deliver such results quicker. I have no doubt that, in the same way, there will be no shortage of good will and hard work throughout the east of England. To match that, we must now ensure that good infrastructure is in place across the region. That is how we will promote economic growth for all communities in the east of England.

Geraint Davies (in the Chair): I hope to call the shadow Minister at 10 minutes past 5. It is a pleasure to call Priti Patel.

5.3 pm

Priti Patel (Witham) (Con): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Mr Davies, and to join the debate. I congratulate my hon. Friend the Member for
Waveney (Peter Aldous) and all colleagues who have spoken on being strong advocates for the east of England. In so many areas, we have common ground. I agree 100% with many of the comments and points that have been made today.

We have heard that the economy of the east of England is vibrant and dynamic. It is an engine of economic growth that contributes enormously to the Exchequer. It delivers on housing and jobs, and we have pioneering industries and manufacturing bases, and quality research and innovation throughout the region, with global connections through ports and airports. We have a world-class array of institutions ranging from Cambridge University to Essex University and many other educational establishments, as well as our traditional industries, in particular agriculture, which we have heard about.

Cumulative economic growth figures for 2010 to 2016 show that, in terms of gross value added, the east of England region hit 13%, behind only London at 22% and the west midlands at 15%. In 2016, our region’s total GVA was £147 billion. The regional population of more than 6 million is also growing fast, at 8.9% for the decade to 2024—the fastest rate after London’s.

In the county that I represent as the Member of Parliament for Witham in Essex, we have first-class airports at Stansted and Southend, and the London Gateway, Tilbury and Harwich ports, which all offer world-class global trading connections. They are keen to expand and grow, not only as we leave the European Union, but to diversify what they do to boost global trade and to secure future growth and job creation.

Since 2010, the number of enterprises in Essex has risen by 25%, from 52,000 to 64,000. The county now contributes around £40 billion in GVA to the UK economy. Essex is highly aspirational and ambitious, and that is shown by the jobs being created. We have heard plenty about infrastructure today, and I want to touch on how vital it is not only to economic development, but to economic prosperity and growth in the region—that cannot be taken for granted. We have heard about public expenditure in the region, which is £1,000 per capita less than the UK average, and our infrastructure has suffered severe historic underfunding. That has to change. My hon. Friend the Member for Clacton (Giles Watling) touched on the issue of the A120. I agree with him 100%—we need that road investment to come fast.

On top of that is another awful conundrum. I have spent many debates in this Chamber talking about the A12, which we also heard about today, but the development scheme for that road is being delayed. Any delay costs money and jobs, while the congestion and extra business costs continue. The Government committed to widening the road between the Boreham and Marks Tey interchanges, but Colchester Borough Council caused delay by changing its housing and development proposals. That scheme needs to be actioned quickly, as does further widening up to the junctions north of Marks Tey.

We have touched on rail. The Great Eastern main line taskforce, which I chair, is all about a key infrastructure route that we absolutely need to invest in. A few years ago we proposed a package that could deliver £4.5 billion in economic benefits to the region, unlocking 50,000 new jobs. We need those urgent improvements.

Sandy Martin (Ipswich) (Lab): We all welcome the new trains on the region’s railways, but they will clearly not be able to perform as well as they might unless we also get infrastructure investment in the track itself. Furthermore, does the right hon. Lady agree that one of the things holding back parts of our region is the extraordinary and anomalous cost of our rail tickets? Some parts of the region are some of the most expensive places anywhere in the country to get to by train per mile.

Priti Patel: The hon. Gentleman is absolutely right. Our constituents as rail passengers are paying some of the highest fares in the country, which also means that we are cross-subsidising other railway networks elsewhere, without reaping money that should be coming back into our own rail lines. That is exactly the purpose of the taskforce—to argue for that infrastructure investment.

Greater investment in digital and broadband has been touched on, so I will not cover that, but it is essential, in particular for connectivity in the rural economy. Instead, I shall end with some comments on fiscal measures, because the debate has come about as a pre-Budget discussion. We want to invest in key infrastructure to boost productivity and jobs, but the Government should also look at fiscal measures to support the economy not only in our region but throughout the economy. That means cutting the tax burden to unleash more job creation and to give entrepreneurs and investors more scope to invest.

More than 80% of my constituents work for SMEs. A worrying trend is politicians constantly looking to introduce tax rises to solve the country’s problems. The Government need to use the tax system to encourage and nurture the entrepreneurial spirit, instead of punishing entrepreneurs. We need to be much more dynamic about addressing that issue, as well as looking at business rate reform and support for our high streets and town centres—frankly, we are seeing their death. In a county that has two airports, we need to look at slashing air passenger duty; it is a cost that affects passengers as well as businesses. We could develop many more flight routes as we trade our way around the world post-Brexit.

Fundamentally, when we get to the Budget and the comprehensive spending review, we must review the tax burden on businesses and do everything possible to ensure that we support enterprise and growth across the east of England.

5.10 pm

Chi Onwurah (Newcastle upon Tyne Central) (Lab): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Mr Davies. I congratulate the hon. Member for Waveney (Peter Aldous) on securing a debate on the important subject of our industrial strategy and economic growth in the east of England. As a Member of Parliament for a north-eastern constituency, I am intimately familiar with the challenges of regional economic growth, although a premiership football club can make a significant difference.

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Business, Energy and Industrial Strategy (Richard Harrington): Enjoy it while you can!
Chi Onwurah: Exactly. As we heard, the east of England contributes nearly 10% of the UK’s gross value added and has experienced cumulative growth of 13% since 2010—slightly higher than average. It boasts enormous strengths, from world-leading science and innovation to agriculture and food production, as was highlighted by the hon. Member for Central Suffolk and North Ipswich (Dr Poulter). With the right support, the region can continue to thrive and contribute to the future prosperity of our country, yet it appears that uncertainty, particularly over Brexit, is causing economic growth in the region to stall, with both business creation and GDP growth down since 2016. That effect is seen in the news that both Robinsons, which has been in the region for 90 years, and Colman’s, which has produced mustard in Norwich for 160 years, are to leave the region, taking jobs with them.

Meeting the challenges of Brexit requires a positive industrial strategy. Unfortunately, what has been put forward so far does not cut the mustard, as Colman’s might say. Let us look at just three aspects of the Government’s industrial strategy. First, if the Government stick to their current policy of arbitrary migration targets with no concern for economic need, and if they press ahead with the Prime Minister’s plans to cut what she calls low-skilled—earning less than £50,000 a year—immigration, businesses will have huge problems recruiting and retaining staff. That is true not only of agriculture, which employs tens of thousands in the east of England, but of research in the region’s great universities and development in the Silicon Fen tech cluster around Cambridge worth £1.54 billion. The Government’s industrial strategy does not try in any meaningful way to address the huge skills gap caused by the Government’s Brexit position.

On skills, it would be easier to plan for future skills need if the Government offered any real devolution or economic decision-making powers to the region, such as the “massive devolution of the skills agenda and funding” that the all-party parliamentary group’s Budget submission calls for. The Cambridgeshire and Peterborough Combined Authority does not have the powers or autonomy enjoyed by others in England, and there has been no visible effort from Government to consult on or put forward regional industrial strategies. I look forward to the Minister explaining how that will happen.

The Government’s approach contrasts starkly with what Labour is doing: we are putting regional need first, with plans for a network of regional investment banks with real money behind them and decisions made locally. We will hold the first in a series of regional industrial strategy conferences in Newcastle next month, and another business conference in the north-west in January. The shadow Chancellor and the shadow Secretary of State for Business, Energy and Industrial Strategy are touring the country holding regional economic conferences and roundtables.

Thirdly, as the Government are paying scant attention to the spread of growth within regions, the all-party parliamentary group’s submission to the Budget argued that the key issue for the east of England is “how to manage and spread Cambridge’s growth to market towns and coastal communities in a strategic and effective manner.” My hon. Friend the Member for Cambridge (Daniel Zeichner) gave a detailed account of the economic strengths his city brings to the region. It boasts as many private-sector research and development jobs as the whole of the north, which has 50 times more people. He also highlighted the key challenges of the unaffordability of housing and poor transport links, both of which deter talent and investment. Tory-led Governments have failed to address either of those issues in eight years, but Labour will build 1 million affordable homes over five years and transform our country’s transport infrastructure with our £250 billion national transformation fund. According to the comments of the right hon. Member for Witham (Priti Patel), the hon. Member for Clacton (Giles Watling) and the hon. Member for Central Suffolk and North Ipswich, that transformation is much desired.

As shadow Science Minister, I am keen to see an industrial strategy that maintains current centres of excellence such as Cambridge. Our strategy would do that, but it should not end there. Last year, research from Sheffield Hallam University found the Government’s pledges as part of their industrial strategy would have an impact on just 1% of the economy. By focusing on a small number of elite technologies and industries, the Government have failed to provide a vision for how workers in Clacton-on-Sea, Yarmouth or Lowestoft can share in the high-quality and growth generated by Cambridge. Labour is committed to building an innovation nation where prosperity, high productivity and good quality, high-skilled jobs are shared across the nation.

The east of England deserves a real industrial strategy that lays out a vision for a shared prosperity across the region: a high-wage, high-skill, high-productivity region that leads the way to a more prosperous post-Brexit future. That is what Labour offers and I hope the Minister will be bold and follow our lead.

5.16 pm

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Business, Energy and Industrial Strategy (Richard Harrington): It is a great pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Mr Davies. Did you arrange the cabaret in the background?

Geraint Davies (in the Chair): Especially for you.

Richard Harrington: I could not quite hear what they were saying, and it is probably better that I could not.

I congratulate my hon. Friend the Member for Waveney (Peter Aldous) not only on calling today’s debate but on his contributions to many other debates I have taken part in. He has always contributed in a non-partisan and a very statesmanlike way, and today was absolutely no exception. I welcome the east of England APPG submission, which we have read in my Department. I hope that some of my points respond to its recommendations.

I have a bit of a strange relationship with the east of England, simply because my constituency, as mentioned by my hon. Friend, is in the east of England, but most people who live in it do not think they are in the east of England, simply because it is such a large area, as was mentioned by several hon. Members. It varies from what some people think is outer London—it is not quite, but there is a more urban type of London demographic—to areas that are geographically quite remote. My right hon. Friend the Member for Witham (Priti Patel) mentioned—eloquently, as ever—that Essex is a huge county in its own right; it varies from outer London urban to quite remote country areas. It is difficult for any policy to take into consideration such a
large area, and there is no simple solution. I accept the point about transport and more modern infrastructures being critical to everything, and I will come to that. It is easy for the European Union and national Government to talk of regions—as we talk about metropolitan areas—as being fairly homogenous.

I want to reiterate the Government’s commitment to promoting growth in the east of England. Any Minister would say that, and I would certainly say that to my constituents in the east of England. But the facts speak for themselves. The region is growing fast. It has seen continued growth in jobs and is one of only three regions that is a net contributor to the UK. Those are exactly the sorts of strengths the country needs to build on in securing a prosperous economic future for the UK as a whole.

As my hon. Friend the Member for Central Suffolk and North Ipswich (Dr Poulter) said, the region has not always pushed its case well, probably because of its large area and the different organisations in it. The all-party group’s report clearly reverses that, but as my hon. Friend the Member for Waveney said, it is the beginning of a process, not a one-off report—the Government certainly do not treat it as such.

Hon. Members highlighted many of the strengths of the east of England. I will not repeat the comprehensive list, but there are world-famous brands in Cambridge, which the hon. Member for Cambridge (Daniel Zeichner) mentioned, as there are in Milton Keynes, Hertfordshire, the coastal region and so on. However, I agree with him that the future is not guaranteed, which is why we have an industrial strategy. The shadow Minister was really quite scathing about that strategy—I hope I have time to come on to that. Governments have industrial strategies and policies because nothing in the economy is guaranteed. She mentioned the effects of our leaving the European Union. None of us knows what they will be, but whatever happens while we are in the European Union or out of it, nothing is guaranteed. It is important that the Government realise the importance of the east of England to the economy.

The shadow Minister will disagree, but since 2010 the Government have made good progress on supporting businesses and people in the east of England. Unemployment has halved, the number of small businesses has increased by more than 100,000 and, although good points were made about apprenticeships, 350,000 people have started them in the area.

The hon. Member for Cambridge mentioned the CPIER report. I welcome that and look forward to seeing how it is reflected in the local industrial strategy. He also mentioned land value capture. The Treasury and I look forward to receiving further developed proposals on land value capture in Cambridgeshire and Peterborough from the Mayor in due course. We have yet to see the full effect of Mayors, but I am positive about them and pleased that we have them.

The east of England is at the forefront of industrial strategy. We have local enterprise partnerships and, as I said, mayoral combined authorities developing and implementing industrial strategies. We are at the beginning of that road, but the east of England is in good shape. The Cambridgeshire and Peterborough combined authority and the South East Midlands LEP have been identified as trailblazer areas as part of the Oxford to Cambridge arc. Those pilot areas have made good progress and are on track to publish their strategies in March next year, with the rest of the region publishing theirs in 2020.

I reject much of what the shadow Minister said—not because she has a premier league football team in her constituency. I have made rather unpleasant comments about that, which I would like to withdraw, and I apologise for any offence caused. I am sure Newcastle United will remain in the premier league at least for this season, if not beyond. If that does not happen, at least she can blame their relegation on our leaving the European Union, since she seems to blame that for everything else.

Chi Onwurah: I thank the Minister for the initial generosity of his remarks about Newcastle United. Should they leave the premier league, we will be clear that the fault lies not with Brexit but with the club’s ownership. We hope his Government do something to address that.

Richard Harrington: I think the hon. Lady just called for the nationalisation of Newcastle United football club. Another few billion for the national debt—it really doesn’t matter, does it? We have many billions more.

Geraint Davies (in the Chair): Order. Minister, we need to focus on the east of England, not the ownership of Newcastle United.

Richard Harrington: Governments have learned the importance of giving local areas control of local growth. I have seen for myself that we have to be careful about that. I studied economics A-level and, being from Leeds, we went to Newcastle to visit the National Economic Development Council there. Those bodies, which were known as “Neddys”, showed that localisation in itself is not enough. That was not a very effective system, but at least it was an attempt to regionalise. We have developed significantly beyond that as a society, which means we do not just send civil servants from London to work in Newcastle and say that is regional.

I hope we will see the benefit of devolution, with LEPs, Mayors and everything else. I am cantering because I have only five minutes—I cannot really take any more questions about that. The Cambridge and Peterborough devolution deal builds on the significant commitments made to the east through previous city deals. I am very optimistic about the greater Cambridge city deal. It is delivering, and I really think we will see a lot more from it.

My hon. Friend the Member for Central Suffolk and North Ipswich made many extremely helpful points. The Government are committed to dealing with local skills shortages, such as those in agriculture, through the establishment of skills advisory panels, which are being rolled out to all parts of eastern England and will help to ensure that training matches the needs of local businesses. That cannot be ignored, and I believe our policy will help to achieve it.

The east of England benefits from more than £700 million of local growth funding through growth deals, and the region’s business-led local enterprise partnerships determine how that funding is spent. I have seen different kinds of LEPs, but the range of products being delivered in this case—the aviation academy
in Norwich, the STEM innovation campus at Stansted airport and the Watford health campus scheme in my constituency, for example—will lead to a more skilled workforce and are very important for the east.

Infrastructure was mentioned by many speakers, in particular my right hon. Friend the Member for Witham and my hon. Friend the Member for Central Suffolk and North Ipswich, who stressed the importance of the A12. That is why, in addition to the devolution city deals I mentioned, we have invested £1.5 billion to upgrade the A14 between Cambridge and Huntingdon, which is an important route, and £151 million in new river crossings. Those are just examples. The transforming cities fund will really help Cambridge and Peterborough, which have already received £74 million. I could go on, but time does not allow.

The Government are committed to working with local partners. Many Members mentioned transport, which is absolutely important. I intend to send a summary of the points they made about particular roads to the Department for Transport. I know Members have done that, but I feel it is my job—I am not in that Department, but I represent the Government—to ensure that those points hit home.

My hon. Friend the Member for Clacton (Giles Watling) spoke so well about no community being left behind. He feels that his community and others, particularly in coastal areas, have been neglected by the system. He stressed the importance of infrastructure in such areas. I will not forget the points he made about his experience on Tendring Council, and I am happy to chat with him separately about that.

We have had a wide-ranging debate in which we did not have time to consider some of the necessary detail. However, the east of England all-party group has set out a model for how such groups can focus their lobbying of the Government on specific points. I am happy to meet formally with the all-party group or with individual Members. I do not mean only those on the Conservative Benches, as I hope the hon. Member for Cambridge knows. These are important points, and I would like to see the successful implementation of many of the policies mentioned in the APPG’s report.

5.29 pm

Peter Aldous: We have had a wide-ranging debate, and I do not have time to highlight colleagues’ excellent contributions. Someone who looks at the east of England might say, “Everything looks reasonably okay there. It’s perfectly satisfactory. Let’s rumble on.” But do we want to be just rumbling on, second best? No, we do not. To use another football analogy, we want to be in the premier league. We want to be in the top four. We want to be not just playing in Europe every year but winning World cups. That is what this work is about and what we are putting the framework down for. This is a new way of doing things. This is a start—let’s get going.

Question put and agreed to.

Resolved,

That this House has considered promoting economic growth in the East of England.

5.30 pm

Sitting adjourned.
Westminster Hall  

Thursday 11 October 2018  

[David Hanson in the Chair]  

BACKBENCH BUSINESS  

Freeports  

1.30 pm  

Mr Simon Clarke (Middlesbrough South and East Cleveland) (Con): I beg to move,  

This House has considered the establishment of freeports in the UK.  

It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Mr Hanson. I thank the Backbench Business Committee, chaired by the hon. Member for Gateshead (Ian Mearns), for granting this timely debate, and the many supporters who helped to secure it, in particular the right hon. Member for Birkenhead (Frank Field). He is a great champion of both Brexit and the north of England, and is held in the highest regard on both sides of the House. He has asked me to pass on his apologies today; he is unfortunately detained on Merseyside.  

What is the issue that unites us, and what is a freeport? At its simplest, a freeport is an area that is physically within a country but legally outside it for customs purposes. Consequently, goods that enter a freeport do not incur import duty. Instead, import duty is paid only if and when goods pass from the freeport into the domestic economy. That offers a number of advantages, as, for example, goods can be imported, processed and then re-exported without incurring any duty. That incentivises international businesses to use the freeport as part of their supply chain, thereby stimulating domestic manufacturing and creating jobs in the process. The deferral of duty also enables goods to be stored or processed in the freeport before entering the domestic economy. That allows businesses to better control their cash flow and, again, encourages domestic manufacturing, as import tariffs on processed goods are often less than those on the individual component parts.  

In addition to the benefits accrued through duty-free status, freeports often offer their users a number of additional advantages, including tax reliefs and a simplified regulatory environment. It is important to stress that there is no one model of freeport. All freeports are different in the mix of advantages that they offer and the physical form that they take—I think we will hear from colleagues today about issues ranging from seaports to airports. The debate, therefore, is about not only whether the UK should establish freeports, but what form they should take. I will begin, however, by briefly describing the case for freeports in general.  

Freeports are not a new idea; indeed, approximately 3,500 freeports are now operating in more than 135 countries. The UK is unusual in that we have no operational freeports. If we are to compete seriously in the global trading system once we leave the EU, that has to change, as my hon. Friend the Member for Richmond (Yorks) (Rishi Sunak) pointed out in his excellent paper for the Centre for Policy Studies. Wherever freeports have been implemented properly around the world they have had that effect. Just look at how quickly and impressively the Jebel Ali free zone in the United Arab Emirates has transformed Dubai. In the space of a few decades, that free zone has brought unimaginable wealth to that country. The free zone alone now hosts 7,000 global companies, employs 145,000 people and accounts for around 40% of the UAE’s total direct foreign investment.  

Jebel Ali is the most unique and dramatic example, but freeports have demonstrated their worth in highly developed and mature economies as well. The growth in freeports in the US, for example, has outperformed the US economy as a whole. One report predicts that if freeports in the UK were as successful as those in the US, we would create an additional 86,000 jobs. There is every indication that freeports in the UK would be just as successful as those around the world—perhaps even more so, given our excellent links with the United States, Europe and the Commonwealth.  

A report commissioned from Mace Group by my fellow Conservative, Tees Valley Mayor Ben Houchen, looked at what a programme of supercharged freeports in the north of England might mean for our economy. It found that such a programme, once established, would boost UK trade by nearly £12 billion a year, create 150,000 extra jobs across the north, including 17,500 in Tees and Hartlepool, and provide a boost to northern powerhouse GDP of £9 billion a year—equivalent to £1,500 a year for every household in the north.  

Although the jobs created by freeports would extend to the service sector as well, the vast majority would be in manufacturing. That in itself would be another huge advantage for the UK economy. Although manufacturing as a share of our economy has declined from 32% of gross value added in 1970 to 10% today, it still accounts for 13% of business investment, 50% of UK exports and 70% of business research and development. It also creates high-paying jobs, with the average worker in manufacturing earning £3,400 more than those in the rest of the economy.  

Increasing the size of our manufacturing sector is also central to boosting the stagnant levels of productivity that the Government have rightly identified as a key structural challenge for the UK economy. As the Government’s industrial strategy White Paper points out:  

“The productivity of the sector has increased four times faster than the rest of the economy”.  

By boosting the share of manufacturing in the UK economy, freeports would have positive effects on productivity, wage levels, the current account deficit, investment, and research and development. Although I would love to see freeports dotted around the entire UK coastline, like giant magnets pulling in container ships from all around the world, I also want to fly the flag particularly for Teesport, and I am delighted to see my friend the hon. Member for Redcar (Anna Turley) here to make that case. Situated immediately adjacent to the site of the former Suharivaya Steel Industries steelworks—now the centre of the largest regeneration project anywhere in the UK—Teesport is undergoing huge investment to prepare it to rival the major ports in Europe. It handles more than 5,000 vessels each year and around 40 million tonnes of cargo, on an
Freeports

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[Mr Simon Clarke]

estate covering almost 800 acres. Teesport has all the qualities that will allow it to prosper as an international hub for trade and supply chain processing: deep water access that allows volumes to be maximised, the availability of extensive brownfield land surrounding the port, excellent transport links to the rest of the country, a ready supply of skilled workers, and a local economy that has so much unrealised potential.

For all the reasons that I have set out, I strongly believe that freeports could transform the economic growth and prosperity of the north-east, as well as the wider UK economy. However, as I have mentioned, freeports come in many forms, and it matters a great deal for the success of a freeport that it consists of the right features. Members may be aware that the UK has experimented with freeports once before. My researcher dredged out a wonderful report from the 1980s by the Adam Smith Institute, setting out the experiment that was launched in 1984, giving six ports around the UK freeport status: Belfast, Birmingham, Cardiff, Liverpool, Prestwick airport and Southampton. All those freeports, however, failed to achieve the success that we have witnessed in others around the world, because they did not offer anything like the advantages that could be acquired in many other freeports outside Europe. That was partly due to an uncharacteristic lack of ambition by the Thatcher Government, but mostly due to the regulatory constraints placed on them by the EU.

It is therefore crucial that, if and when we reintroduce freeports to the UK, we allow them the oxygen that they need to breathe and come to life. That is where I take issue with the Government’s current position. In his reply to a written question from me earlier this week, the Financial Secretary to the Treasury emphasised that the Customs and Excise Management Act 1979, which I am sure we all know well, already provides a legal basis for the designation of free zones, and will continue to do so following our departure from the EU.

I am a great admirer of the Minister, and I know that he is deeply committed to boosting our economy. I am also genuinely grateful for the supportive conversations that I have had with other Treasury Ministers about how we could aim to deliver a new generation of freeports.

At the macro level, freeports must be able to offer lower levels of taxation and less burdensome regulations than exist outside. Those conditions are crucial for attracting new business, creating jobs, and encouraging start-ups. Freeports also need to be able to curb bureaucratic administration by having both automatic concessions and collective processing. Automatic concessions would mean that freeport users do not have to undertake the costly and lengthy process of applying for individual concessions, such as for inward processing relief. Collective processing would also reduce paperwork, as the freeport operators would deal directly with customs documentation on behalf of, or a number of, their tenants.

Successful freeports must also offer their users security. The heightened security around freeports is often perceived as a necessary burden, required to prevent smuggling. However, the existence of a highly secure customs perimeter affords freeport users huge cost savings in the form of lower insurance premiums. High-value stock is also more secure, and the insurance need cover only the duty-free, rather than duty-paid, value of the stock.

The final advantage that all freeports must be able to offer businesses is improved cash flow. To an extent, it will arise naturally because of the ability to defer duty payments until the goods actually leave the freeport, but additional measures can be taken. Ideally, VAT should be scrapped on transactions within the freeport so that businesses are not required to wait for needless VAT refunds.

In summary, we should not aim to establish the type of insipid freeport that one finds across the European continent. Instead, we should aspire to construct supercharged freeports like those found in China, the US and the middle east.

Michael Tomlinson (Mid Dorset and North Poole) (Con): My hon. Friend makes a powerful and compelling case. He mentioned that freeports come in all shapes and sizes. Does he agree that the UK’s regional airports present an opportunity to expand freeports or free zones? It is good to see the Minister in his place; does my hon. Friend, like me, look forward to a positive answer from him to the call for freeports, not only in the north-east but in our regional airports?

Mr Clarke: I agree completely that the opportunities are not restricted to Teesport or even to airports. Airports could be a logical centre for such innovation; I know of freeport zones in Tennessee that are centred around local airports and that keep spreading prosperity to areas that are not naturally at the centre of current economic success. That is the point: freeports can really diversify the benefits of a liberalised economy into areas that have struggled to attract the levels of inward investment that other cities or areas have enjoyed. Regional airports should absolutely be part of the strategy. I think the Government would broadly agree that if the idea is taken forward, it will not be in any way restricted to seaports.

Why are freeports back on the agenda now after a three-decade hibernation? The answer, of course, is Brexit. Leaving the European Union is the perfect opportunity to establish supercharged freeports, for three reasons. First, we will be free from EU regulatory restraint and will therefore have the freedom to create something meaningful, rather than just glorified bonded warehouses. Secondly, as we pivot from Europe to the rest of the world, we will need to be even more competitive to attract new business. I cannot emphasise enough that if we accept a looser economic relationship with Europe, we will have to establish better ways of enhancing our trade relationships with the rest of the world or the exercise will lose all economic meaning. Thirdly, in the event that we end up with no preferential trading relationship with the EU, freeports will help us to maintain frictionless trade, especially for just-in-time supply chains.

That brings me to my final point, which is about our future relationship with the EU. The type of freeport that we can introduce post Brexit is inextricably linked to the type of relationship that we forge with our
European partners. At the heart of the question lies state aid, on which the EU has much more stringent rules than the World Trade Organisation. The most fundamental difference is that under WTO rules, only “financial contributions” count as subsidies, whereas the European Commission defines state aid as “an advantage in any form whatsoever”.

Although setting up a freeport is possible within the EU, the state aid restrictions make it impossible to set up the type of successful freeports that we want and need, with power to attract meaningful levels of foreign investment and incentivise the onshoring of jobs. Crucially, members of the European economic area are automatically bound by all EU state aid rules, while Canada, in its new comprehensive trade agreement with the EU, applies none of them. If we are serious about establishing freeports in the UK, our future relationship with the EU will therefore need to look a lot more like Canada plus than like EEA minus.

From the proposals in the Chequers White Paper, it looks as if the freeport opportunity will die without a shot fired. The White Paper pledges that “the UK would make an upfront commitment to maintain a common rulebook with the EU on state aid”.

That makes really depressing reading. By committing to apply the entire EU state aid rulebook, we are tying our hands and sapping our ability to attract foreign investment, boost international trade and ultimately create thousands of jobs in the UK, mostly in manufacturing.

To avoid any misunderstanding by the Government, I want it to be crystal clear that, for me, that is not good enough. The whole Chequers approach is characterised by the desire to split the difference between being a member of the EU and being an independent country, but it ends up delivering the benefits of neither. Along with the wider democratic deficit involved in our voting to leave the EU, but then accepting being a rule taker, that is why I must end my speech by emphasising that I am deadly serious that I cannot and will not support the Chequers proposals if they form the basis of an agreement with the EU in a few weeks’ time.

Freeports are one demonstration of why we would fare far better in a looser trading relationship with the EU based on a super-Canada deal. The remaining negotiating time should be spent in practical engagement on the Irish border, to which very clear solutions have been suggested and which I believe is much more about a political than a practical obstacle. It is very simple: time—both for freeports and for a proper Brexit—is running out.

1.45 pm

Anna Turley (Redcar) (Lab/Co-op): As always, Mr Hanson, it is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship. I congratulate my right hon. Friend the Member for Birkenhead (Frank Field) and my near neighbour the hon. Member for Middlesbrough South and East Cleveland (Mr Clarke) on securing the debate. It is great to come together across the party divide to champion our area, because the hon. Gentleman and I both recognise how freeport status for Teesport could help and support our constituents.

My constituency lies at the mouth of the River Tees, where the North sea brings its cargo from around the world and ships queue to bring their goods to the third-largest port in the UK. It is from that port that steel from Redcar’s blast furnaces once sailed forth to build the world. Today, sadly, the site is desolate; the steelworks is now closed, and the 3,000 jobs it sustained are gone. But the land sits waiting, ready to drive a new industrial renaissance for Teesside. A freeport could be the key to unlocking the site’s huge value and delivering thousands more jobs. It could create employment and economic activity in an area where the need is high.

The same is true across the UK, as the hon. Gentleman said. Of the country’s 30 largest ports, 17, including my own, are in the bottom quartile of local authorities in the index of multiple deprivation. They are crying out for the inward investment that a freeport could draw in, so we must take a radical look at proposals to support their economies.

Like the hon. Gentleman, I make no apology for lobbying for freeport status on behalf of the port in my constituency. Teesport has strong structural advantages that should make it favoured for freeport status, including a deep-water facility that provides lock-free access to the sea and strong road and rail services. The facility already handles 5,000 vessels and 40 million tonnes of cargo a year. The port is integral to the Teesside manufacturing complex, incorporating chemicals, engineering, renewable energy and agritech.

The South Tees development corporation is overseeing the former SSI site, the biggest industrial opportunity that the UK has seen since the second world war. The development corporation—the only one of its kind outside London—has set out its ambition to create 20,000 additional jobs in high-value manufacturing over 25 years, with £1 billion in gross value added for the local economy. That programme would be substantially enhanced by the creation of a freeport. Incorporating the development corporation area into a freeport area, together with the Teesport facility, and in conjunction with adjacent industrial sites such as Wilton and North Shore, could help the region to build on its strengths in chemicals, steel, energy and logistics and realise our vision to become the most attractive place in the country for high-value manufacturing.

With the North East of England Process Industry Cluster leading the way, Teesside is the location for the largest integrated chemical complex in the UK—the second largest in western Europe in manufacturing capacity. The sector has inputs to a range of other key industries such as aerospace, automotive and life sciences. It is highly productive and competitive but faces a number of challenges, such as increasing global competition, high operating costs and skills shortages. A freeport could be part of a range of policy solutions to maintain and enhance the attractiveness of investment in the chemical sector in the UK and on Teesside. Freeport status for Teeside could make the area the gateway of the north, rebalancing the economy and making the region’s manufacturing base more competitive and attractive.

As the hon. Member for Middlesbrough South and East Cleveland noted, a study commissioned this year by the global construction company Mace Group shows that a freeport in Tees Valley could create more than 17,500 jobs and contribute more than £1 billion to the local economy—more than enough to offset any loss to the Treasury in import tax revenue. That should be considered when we weigh up the economic advantages. For an area in which unemployment is above the national average and many in work have to travel further afield or take insecure jobs, the proposal could be transformative.
As I mentioned, there are many areas similar to mine that have suffered deprivation and industrial decline, and that could see an economic boost delivered by a freeport. A freeport could also future-proof many of our other industries, which are battling to stay increasingly competitive in turbulent world markets. We only have to look around the world to see how our competitors are taking full advantage of freeports. Approximately 3,500 freeport zones exist, employing 66 million people across 135 countries. We are clearly lagging behind the rest of the world in this area.

Freeport zones are recognised around the world as playing a major role in retaining, reshoring and growing domestic manufacturing activity and boosting trade. There are 250 free trade zones in the US, and freeport zones also play a major role in the economies of Singapore, Hong Kong, Indonesia and the United Arab Emirates. However, I would urge caution when we are developing the model, to ensure that there is no erosion of employment rights, environmental rights or health and safety rights. It is really important that we look at the models that are being used around the world if we come to develop our own.

My view diverges slightly from that of the hon. Member for Middlesbrough South and East Cleveland, who said the advantages of freeports are dependent on being outside the EU. We could be taking advantage of them right now—indeed, he mentioned the legislation that we had in the past for models in the UK. Other member states already have freeports, including the ports of Bremerhaven in Germany, Le Verdon in France, and Shannon in the Republic of Ireland. In fact, there are currently over 85 freeport zones in the European Union. There are no barriers, but there is a lack of political will.

While this is the first debate that we have dedicated to the benefits of freeports, it is not the first time we have made this case in the House. Many Members, including myself and my neighbour, the hon. Member for Middlesbrough South and East Cleveland, have championed freeports for our own areas; indeed, I tabled amendments to the Taxation (Cross-border Trade) Bill that would have established the legislative basis for free zones to return to the UK. Until 2012, we had the legislation in place for five freeports, but unfortunately the statutory instruments creating them expired, and freeports were never fully explored. Moreover, the Secretary of State is already empowered to designate any freeport by statutory instrument under section 100A of the Customs and Excise Management Act 1979, which was referred to earlier and which is still in force.

I say to the Minister that the Government have an opportunity here to deliver transformative change to deprived areas across the UK, including my own. There could be no better expression of the northern powerhouse than delivering a freeport boost to northern ports and ports across the country, stimulating manufacturing, rebalancing the economy and creating jobs. I beg the Government to give serious consideration to this issue without delay.

1.52 pm

Martin Vickers (Cleethorpes) (Con): It is always a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Mr Hanson, and I congratulate my hon. Friend the Member for Middlesbrough South and East Cleveland (Mr Clarke) on securing this important debate at a particularly opportune time. The UK is an island nation and has always been very dependent on our ports; indeed, 90% of all our trade by volume, and 75% of our trade by value, passes through UK ports. Post Brexit, we have an opportunity to capitalise on this and to open up the country to world markets at a level never previously seen as possible.

I take note of the slight differences between the two previous speakers’ views on whether membership of the EU restricts us in doing that; my understanding is that it certainly does, and it is worth noting that the MaC report referred to previously says that leaving the EU and the customs union can be seized on as an opportunity to enhance the UK’s ability to achieve these things. Let us ignore whether they are, strictly speaking, allowable at the moment; the fact is that Brexit is going to happen, and it provides the window of opportunity that we need.

Taking certain areas around a port or an airport and putting them outside the domestic customs area, as my hon. Friend the Member for Middlesbrough South and East Cleveland said, is good for business. It is also worth noting that the designated freeport need not be entirely adjacent to the port estate. In my constituency, there is an industrial estate called Europarce, which straddles the Grimsby and Cleethorpes constituencies. In discussions I have had with operators there, they can see great value in designating that as a part of the freeport zone.

As has been outlined, freeports allow us to import goods from abroad, and goods leaving the area can be sent abroad, without the usual duties—it incentivises domestic manufacturing. Around the world, there are something like 3,500 freeports, but sadly there is none here in the UK. That puts us at a considerable disadvantage and poses a serious risk of us slipping behind some of our trading partners and competitors.

The Chief Secretary recently visited my constituency. On that occasion, I hosted a discussion on freeports, which included Associated British Ports—the port operators of Grimsby and Immingham—Humberside Airport, Young’s Seafood, the Humber local enterprise partnership and the Hull and Humber chamber of commerce. It was highly encouraging to hear the strong levels of support from those organisations, which encompass both the public and private sectors. On the day, the Chief Secretary tweeted that freeports for the north could give the UK a £9 million boost. I say to the Minister that an even more senior Minister than his good self has already committed to the fact that freeports will give us a £9 million boost. Since the Treasury says so, we know it must be true.

ABP, which owns and controls much of the port infrastructure in my constituency and the surrounding area, is incredibly positive about the prospect of freeports being rolled out across the country. If done properly, there is absolutely no doubt that there could be numerous benefits for this major port operator and, more importantly, for local businesses that feed into the area around our major ports. When I took Simon Bird, the port director for the Humber ports, to see Brexit Ministers some months ago, he outlined the concept of a freeport corridor between the various ports, perhaps on the east...
and west coasts. I know Ministers were enthusiastic about it at that stage, and it is something that could be looked at in the future.

By exempting products from import tariffs, businesses can process and manufacture goods to be exported to a third country. That reduces costs, increases profitability and leads to greater local investment. By allowing products to enter the zone and have duty paid when they leave it later, businesses can warehouse and process goods and improve cash-flow cycles and efficiency. That is especially beneficial for sectors that depend on just-in-time management, such as the fishing and fresh food sectors—that is of particular importance to my constituency, where 5,000 people are employed in fish processing.

Another reason to support freeports is tariff inversion. Finished products generally face lower tariffs than the parts that make them. If the Humber were to be made a freeport, cars could be brought into Immingham and Grimsby, as they are today, along with additional upgrade components. There are also tax incentives: we can incentivise companies to generate new economic activity within freeport zones, and this can be done by a range of methods, such as offering reduced rates of corporation tax, rewarding job creation with lower levels of employment rates, or by setting a lower rate of VAT on goods brought in through the zone. I fully agree with the hon. Member for Redcar (Anna Turley) that it is absolutely vital that we do not use the freeport concept to reduce employee standards in the workplace.

Many tangible benefits would be felt quickly by local businesses and communities where freeports are implemented. Some of our best ports are in the northern coastal communities that have been run down over the years, as referred to previously. Freeports would enable regeneration in these communities through private enterprise rather than at the expense of the taxpayer. Freeports are an opportunity that can be seized on to ensure that businesses are attracted to those northern communities that have been left behind, and to make the most of competitive global trading markets.

It is for that reason that I launched the all-party parliamentary group on freeports a few months ago, and I thank my colleagues for electing me as the group’s chairman. I hope the APPG can keep this issue on the political agenda—I appreciate Ministers are rather bogged down at the moment with the details of Brexit. Perhaps we need to concentrate more on the opportunities of Brexit.

The areas around the ports, including my own—the Grimsby-Cleethorpes-Immingham area—have been ranked in the bottom quartile for deprived areas. A policy that leads to a boost in investment has got to be welcomed. Five of the UK’s major ports are located in the north. Together, they handle more than 10 million tonnes of goods and contribute £5 billion of economic value each year. By tonnage, the Grimsby and Immingham docks complex is the largest in the country. It ranks first in the UK for trade in coal, second for metal ores and third for coal products. The port of Immingham alone is responsible for providing fuel for 10% of the UK’s energy production. Clearly, it is vital for the UK’s energy strategy that freeport status further unlocks that potential.

In the Humber, there is a strategic focus on energy—specifically renewables. The continuing investment in the renewable energy sector is another example of the investment and job opportunities in Immingham and the surrounding area. As coal declines, biomass has grown, and Immingham is crucial for the import of the biomass that is supplied to the Drax power station near Selby.

We talk a great deal about rebalancing the economy and ending the north-south divide. That is a mission of every Government, but we have yet to achieve it in any meaningful way. In 2016, the northern economy created £330 billion of economic output, but had the north and south been balanced, it would have been about £400 billion. That is £70 billion more—equivalent to £15,000 per household in the north of England. If the Government are serious about addressing that imbalance—and I know they are—freeports are a logical means to that end.

Hon. Members have already referred to the report from the consultancy company Mace, which puts forward the idea of freeport status for seven northern ports. It states:

“The successes of the Humber—the ‘Energy Estuary’—demonstrate the sheer scale of sector-specific successes that can be achieved”.

Freeports would be a sensible way to expand that success, for not just the north of England but the whole country.

There is also the possibility of combining freeports with existing enterprise zones to create supercharged freeports, which would be a powerful force for economic growth and job creation. Mace calculated that declaring those seven ports across the north as supercharged would boost trade by £12 billion and create 150,000 jobs in the north. That would be a momentous step for the northern powerhouse and would prove beyond doubt that the idea is more than just a slogan. Projections show that the supercharged freeports could close the north UK productivity gap by 15%, which would be another welcome step in rebalancing the economy.

Freeports are inextricably linked to Brexit. The success of this policy requires the UK to have full control of its trade policy and customs arrangements. Freeports can be properly implemented only in a post-Brexit world. Although technically possible within the EU, red tape and restrictions from Brussels would make them somewhat ineffective and would seriously hinder our ability to become a truly global Britain. The Shannon free trade zone, set up in the Republic of Ireland in 1959, has been decimated by the Republic’s membership of the EU. Having discussed the matter with industry experts, I am convinced that the current plans for our relationship with the EU, as outlined in the White Paper, would be insufficient to make a success of freeports. I fully concur with the comments of my hon. Friend the Member for Middlesbrough South and East Cleveland about the Chequers deal. We have got to establish full control over our trade and economic policies. That crucial message was delivered during the referendum campaign, and we need to deliver on it properly.

Cleethorpes, Grimsby and Immingham make up the North East Lincolnshire Council area, which voted 70% for Brexit. As one of the MPs for that area, I am determined to press the Government on every possible occasion to ensure that what those people voted for is delivered. A freeports policy would instantly end the criticism that the Brexit decision was about being little England. This is an opportunity to broaden our trading
capacity and look to the growing economies in India, China, the far east, South America and so on, rather than solely focus on the EU economies, which are static at best.

I urge the Minister to be brave, break out from his brief, go along with the Chief Secretary and give us a real boost. Let us talk about the opportunities of Brexit, rather than the problems of getting there. Over to you, Minister.

2.5 pm

Julia Lopez (Hornchurch and Upminster) (Con): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Mr Hanson. I appreciate the fact that my hon. Friend the Member for Middlesbrough South and East Cleveland (Mr Clarke) has injected some much needed energy into post-Brexit planning.

Brexit should be a moment of creative opportunity, when we begin to tailor our nation better to fit our citizens’ needs and ambitions. Leaving the EU was never going to be easy—I am not naive—but we in this House have spent two years engaged in a series of infertile, factional war dances, unable to unify around a vision that would allow us to plan properly for the future. Let us have more debates like this in which we set out fresh ideas that can deliver results for the people we represent.

Freeports, as other hon. Members have said, are special trading zones that are considered to be outside a country for customs purposes. Goods can enter and exit a freeport without incurring tariffs and the need for import procedures. That makes way for the import of semi-finished products, such as car parts, from other countries into the UK on special terms. Such parts can be modified or stored, to be re-exported as UK products. By themselves, initiatives such as freeports will not spark a manufacturing renaissance, but when integrated with local enterprise zones, they can help to create the conditions for manufacturing to thrive—particularly in northern towns, which for too long have lived in the shadow of our industrial heritage. The idea deserves consideration as part of a dynamic new trade strategy.

However, let us be truthful: we cannot have a meaningful, independent trade strategy if we remain in a de facto customs union with the EU. The notion that we can sign trade agreements worth having while contained within an indefinite backstop arrangement is, I fear, misguided. Time and again in the International Trade Committee, of which I am a member, and in meetings, international partners have expressed a genuine eagerness to engage in new trading arrangements and initiatives with the UK. They are excited about the re-entry of a major G7 player as an independent trading nation that can push an agenda on global standards and free trade. However, they advise us that it is impossible to start much of that work without a clear sense of the UK’s future trading arrangements with the EU.

Meanwhile, businesses tell us clearly that they simply want clarity, and then they will deal with whatever new arrangements come to pass. The threat of withdrawal negotiations must not leave us in a state of perpetual uncertainty. That would be hugely damaging to our nation’s economic interests, and I dare not contemplate how the public would feel if we advised that we had delivered on the referendum result while subcontracting regulatory policy making to our EU competitors. Contempt for the political class that we would surely deepen, with consequences for our democracy.

The EU has been criticised for vigorously protecting its own interests in this negotiation. Of course, it does not want a more dynamic competitor on its doorstep—I understand that—but we should be equally vigorous in defending our own interests. Freeports, free trade agreements, regulation and trade facilitation measures should all be part of a modern global trade strategy, but infrastructure investment and the manner in which we connect it coherently is also critical.

It may not be fashionable to champion investment in London in a Chamber full of non-London MPs, but the capital should be understood not as one rich haven but as a collection of very different regions, not all of which are thriving and not all of which have seen sustained investment over the years. Before containerisation and offshoring, London’s docks and manufacturers provided east Londoners with a range of opportunities for blue-collar work. By the ’60s, however, the docks began to close, leaving in their wake high levels of unemployment and the depopulation of docking boroughs. The redevelopment of the Isle of Dogs into London’s second financial hub, Canary Wharf, has been a staggering success, but many communities to Canary Wharf’s east still see the glittering office blocks as something very distant from their lives.

Today in Barking and Dagenham, one third of people are paid less than the London living wage. Meanwhile, parts of my own borough of Havering have a very low skills base. More than half of the adults in the borough do not have A-level-equivalent qualifications. Ford in Dagenham, which was once London’s biggest employer, stopped car production in 2002, and a workforce that was 40,000 at its height has diminished to 1,830.

Exciting things are happening in east London and the Thames Gateway, including the newish London Gateway port. Chinese investment in the Royal Albert dock—planned film studios in Dagenham and the arrival of the Barking continental freight railway. All these developments require a catalyst to bring them together and help the region and its people fulfil their huge potential. Perversely, although it is west London’s airport, that catalyst could be Heathrow, which is the UK’s biggest port by value, handling over £106 billion-worth of goods each year. Now that its expansion has been given the green light in Parliament, the airport’s executives want to build large chunks of the new expanded airport offsite at so-called logistics hubs, and then transport those components of the third runway to the site as and when they are required. With infrastructure projects like HS2 and Sizewell contemplating sharing those hubs, the bid that makes the final cut can expect an influx of cutting-edge engineering, research and manufacturing jobs to the area.

Havering has put together an exciting plan for a logistics hub at an 86-acre brownfield site next to the Ford Dagenham plant, which is a stone’s throw from Canary Wharf. As one of the borough’s three MPs, I am extremely excited by the opportunity that the plan presents for reigniting manufacturing in the capital. Superbly connected by river, rail, road and air, the site is next to an industrial estate with 70 logistics companies already there. It is near the ports of Tilbury and London
customs tax policy. Please, let us not pretend otherwise.

strategy, we need control of our own regulatory and to maximise that tax policy, regulation, freeports and other ideas coming through free trade agreements alone—it is about global ambitions will take time and cannot be done people who feel left behind. Realigning our country to diversifying our economy and making it deliver for manufacturing centre?

London’s illustrious heritage as a cutting-edge supercharge the eastern region as a global trading unlock the regeneration aspirations of the Thames Gateway, as well as the Barking terminus of the intercontinental railway, which, as I have said before, is part of China’s belt and road initiative. A housing zone is planned nearby and the adjacent Centre for Engineering and Manufacturing Excellence, as well as Havering College’s expanding construction campus, could train up local jobseekers.

The Havering-Heathrow hub could therefore have a profound impact in tackling deprivation, crime and unemployment in an area that has struggled to replace the kinds of blue-collar jobs that were formerly provided by the docks and the motor industry. Once the runway is built, the logistics hub could become a cargo processing centre.

We need to do imaginative things which will rapidly and effectively signal what kind of nation we seek to be as we leave the European Union. For instance, could a Havering hub be turned into an east London check-in point for Heathrow itself, taking thousands of car journeys away from the M25 and removing luggage from tube trains as passengers catch organised shuttles or dedicated rail services to the main terminals? A rail line already connects Ford’s Dagenham plant to Stratford, and the Abbey Wood branch of Crossrail could be extended by one stop to provide a direct route to the airport. The Thames could reclaim its glory days of transporting cargo—taking countless lorries off the roads—and acting as a link between air and sea freight terminals. All this would help reduce pressure on the communities around Heathrow airport. We could even explore the creation of a free trade zone from the cargo processing hub at Beam Reach—the logistics hub site—to the ports at Tilbury and Thurrock, which would finally unlock the regeneration aspirations of the Thames Gateway and supercharge the eastern region as a global trading portal that links London and the UK to the rest of the world.

The capital may have been thriving for those working in the service industries, but that has not been the case for many in blue-collar professions. As we leave the European Union, why not use the opportunity of the expansion of our biggest port, Heathrow, to restore east London’s illustrious heritage as a cutting-edge manufacturing centre?

No one aspect of our trading policy can be a panacea in diversifying our economy and making it deliver for people who feel left behind. Realigning our country to global ambitions will take time and cannot be done through free trade agreements alone—it is about infrastructure investment, trade facilitation measures, tax policy, regulation, freeports and other ideas coming together in one coherent strategy. But to maximise that strategy, we need control of our own regulatory and customs tax policy. Please, let us not pretend otherwise.

2.13 pm

Lee Rowley (North East Derbyshire) (Con): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Mr Hanson, and thank you for the opportunity to contribute.

I congratulate my hon. Friend the Member for Middlesbrough South and East Cleveland (Mr Clarke), and other hon. Members present, on being the driving force behind this debate, to which it is a pleasure to contribute. In the year and a half that my hon. Friend the Member for Middlesbrough South and East Cleveland and I have been in Parliament, he has been a doughty campaigner on this issue, and has sent me and other new MPs many letters, pieces of information and general perorations telling us about the wonderful new opportunity of freeports. I am grateful to have the opportunity to agree with him officially and on the record.

I came here to listen as much as to speak, because this is an area of interest to me but not one that I know a huge amount about. Some of the speeches have been incredibly useful in helping somebody who is new to the subject understand it. People may ask why a Member of Parliament for one of the most landlocked constituencies in the country—roughly 70 miles away from either coast—is talking about freeports, and while other Members have been speaking, I have been trying to work out a way in which I could make a connection. I attended Transport questions earlier, and we received the extremely good news that the go-ahead has been given for the regeneration and connection of the final stretch of the 250-year-old Chesterfield canal, which links to the River Trent at Stockwith, near the constituency of my hon. Friend the Member for Cleethorpes (Martin Vickers), before reaching the North sea at Hull. The canal was threatened for years and years because of the potential for High Speed 2 to rip it up. Hopefully, we can push for a freeport at the end of the Chesterfield canal at some point in the next couple of decades, when that regeneration occurs.

The real reason I am here is that it is so pleasing to see a debate in this place about the power and the opportunity that economic capitalism and liberalism could unleash on populations such as those in the constituencies of the hon. Members who have spoken, before spreading to other constituencies like my own. In the year and a half that I have been here, I have looked over the Order Paper every single day. Often, it seems to be a never ending set of requests for more activity and more intervention, and for more to be done by the state. Sometimes, it is incumbent upon Members to stand back and realise that some of the wider powers and bigger forces that actually improve lives in this country can only act when we let government get out of the way and let people and commerce thrive in the way that freeports would allow if instituted properly, as my hon. Friends have outlined. I am extremely pleased that we are all agreeing that the forces of liberalism and capitalism—much-maligned in recent years—have the power to do good, make our areas richer, put money in people’s pockets and drive our country forward.

Secondly, I want to speak about the opportunities arising from Brexit, which have already been touched on. It is so refreshing to be in a debate in which we do not necessarily talk much about Brexit—although I am going to touch on it in a moment—but about the opportunities that it can bring. This being one of the first debates in the new term, I hope that it is a turning point, and that we can now look beyond Brexit rather than being completely consumed by the seemingly interminable process of it, which I fear will require us to go through significant time, energy and tears yet.

I concur with my hon. Friends the Members for Cleethorpes, for Middlesbrough South and East Cleveland, and for Hornchurch and Upminster (Julian Beimers) if we are to leave the EU—we are leaving; my constituents voted 63% to leave—we need to leave in a way that gives us the most flexibility, the most opportunity and the
most ability to innovate in the coming months, years and decades. That is the prize and the opportunity that our country needs to grasp. If we do not do that—if we fall between two stools and fail to recognise that we have the power to stand on our own two feet independently, while remaining hugely friendly with our European friends and allies—we will not be delivering the Brexit that people voted for in 2016 and, more importantly, we will not be obtaining the opportunities or the value that could come from Brexit. I wholeheartedly endorse the comments made by my hon. Friends: Chequers in its current form does not work and it does not give us the opportunities we have been talking about today, and I will not support it if it is put to a vote in the House.

The third reason for my speech is that this is an opportunity for us to innovate, to change, to look at how our regulations do or not work, and to boost our commerce. The most nimble and most independent countries will thrive in the next few decades, and innovations such as freeports offer us the opportunity to do so. As my hon. Friend the Member for Middlesbrough South and East Cleveland outlined, examples such as Jebel Ali in the United Arab Emirates, which has 140,000 people working there and receives nearly a fifth of all direct investment in the UAE, demonstrates the kind of opportunities that we may be able to grasp if we take them.

There are also manufacturing opportunities. My constituency is an old manufacturing area, as well as an old mining area, and it still has a significant amount of manufacturing. If freeports can contribute in any way to bringing back some manufacturing, with a focus on high-skill manufacturing, building on what we have, we should all welcome that.

In summary, I am still trying to work out how to get a freeport 70 miles away from a coast. I will continue to think that through at my leisure. Divergence is sometimes an opportunity, as this is. I hope that we, as a Government and a country, will take up such opportunities, because if we do we can be extremely successful in the years to come.

David Hanson (in the Chair): We have an abundance of time for the Front-Bench speakers, so there is no need for them to restrict themselves to the normal 10 minutes each.

2.20 pm

Douglas Chapman (Dunfermline and West Fife) (SNP): Thank you, Mr Hanson, and it is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship. I warmly thank the hon. Member for Middlesbrough South and East Cleveland (Mr Clarke) for bringing the debate to the Chamber.

The hon. Member for North East Derbyshire (Lee Rowley) said early on that he was present to listen rather than to speak. Given some of the comments we have heard and will continue to hear about Brexit, clearly we need to start listening a lot more, because we need to learn new tricks if we want our economy to survive and to be a real success.

I do not want to detract from the cross-party consensus, but Brexit takes away the European Union customs union—or is likely to—which in effect is a huge economic free trade zone, with no costs from borders or additional taxation in each individual member state of the EU. In the absence of the customs union, therefore, we will have to invent or reinvent a freeport or free zone area in our own country to compensate.

Even so, many EU countries have freeport or free zone areas—22 countries have such arrangements, I think. In Spain, for example, elements of free trade zones are found on the Mediterranean coast in the ports of Barcelona and Cadiz; in the north, on the Atlantic coast, in Vigo; and in the airport area in Madrid, which was fairly landlocked last time I looked—though perhaps not as much as eastern Derbyshire. Closer to home, the Isle of Man has a free zone, as do other countries in the EU. From my perspective, the great bonus of freeports is the boost to economic activity in areas where trading conditions need a shot in the arm to increase jobs, economic vibrancy, trade and exports.

According to many reports, Brexit will have a more detrimental effect in Northern Ireland, north-east England, Wales and Scotland than elsewhere. In Scotland, according to a fairly recent report, we are looking at a 9% reduction in gross domestic product if we go into Brexit under World Trade Organisation rules. If there is a no-deal Brexit, the GDP in north-east England is expected to drop by some 16%, and 80,000 jobs in my country will be at risk. I hope that we do not get to that stage, but the warning signals are clearly there.

To have the most impact, free trade or freeport zones are best placed outside London and the south-east. If someone is determined—as I am sure the Minister is—to address economic inequality throughout the UK, we need to consider how to boost the economy in other parts of the UK—the parts that will be worst affected by Brexit. The British Ports Association has said that freeports would be most beneficial where a port has plenty of land so that value-adding economic activity can also take place.

All Members who have spoken in the debate have made a case for their own neck of the woods, and I am delighted to let everyone know a little about my constituency. Our local port, Rosyth, has all the ingredients necessary for the successful operation of a freeport: a lot of available land, much of it on brownfield sites; a rail link that is greatly underutilised but nevertheless only a mile from the main east coast line and a motorway system that includes the new, iconic Queensferry crossing, providing a 15-minute corridor between the port of Rosyth and Edinburgh airport. We also have a talented workforce—the usual situation in Scotland, as I think every Member would accept—and the desire to become the beating heart of the Scottish economy, ready to take on opportunities wherever they may appear.

An opportunity that no one has yet mentioned is an unwanted feature of climate change: more and more sea routes are being created to the north and through the Arctic. Ships can now move along the northern coast of Norway, past Russia and to China, with a number of months in the year seeing more seaborne activity. In a northern port such as Rosyth, with easy access to those waters, we see that as a bonus.

We also have to take care. As the hon. Member for Redcar (Anna Turley) pointed out, freeports cannot be introduced to push along a low-wage economy or to act as a centre for illegal trade just because some of the rules have been softened or relaxed. It might also be disrespectful of the environment, even in a freeport, the “polluter pays” principle must still apply.
The British Ports Association briefing, which I think we all received, made for some encouraging reading: 95% of trade is carried by sea, whether imports or exports, container traffic or bulk goods; 60 million passenger journeys are made between the UK and the rest of Europe every year; and 500 million tonnes of freight pass through all ports in the UK, which employ almost 100,000 people. We have a really good ports sector on which to build, and that is a real feather in our cap, a real hand-up and a great start in developing our port facilities.

I am a member of the all-party group on freeports, under the chairmanship of the hon. Member for Cleethorpes (Martin Vickers), and I believe that we will be able to highlight some of the pros and cons of freeports. We are all determined to grow our economy, to create jobs and to deal with some of the vagaries of Brexit in the parts of the country that will be hardest hit. The hon. Gentleman mentioned the possibility of creating a super-freeport zone. If that included a specific focus on inward investment and a wider economic corridor, we could gain different benefits from a wide range of enterprises, and perhaps bring in an innovation hub linking universities and colleges in whichever area the freeport might sit.

I look forward to hearing the Minister’s views. An early announcement on freeports and how they will be financed will be very welcome.

2.28 pm

Judith Cummins (Bradford South) (Lab): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Mr Hanson. I congratulate the hon. Member for Middlesbrough South and East Cleveland (Mr Clarke) and my right hon. Friend the Member for Birkenhead (Frank Field) on securing this important and timely debate.

We have heard how our ports play a vital role in facilitating our global trade, and about their importance to coastal communities and regional economies. However, 95% of our goods trade passes through our ports, which is significantly higher than the EU and international averages. Our businesses depend on our ports to get their goods to overseas markets. Our ports handle an estimated 500 million tonnes of freight each year, making our port industry the second largest in the EU, with more than 100,000 people in towns and cities around our coast employed directly, and many thousands more in supporting and related businesses. In 2015, the maritime sector accounted for approximately £4.7 billion in tax revenues—some 0.7% of the total tax take that year, with the port and shipping industries being the largest contributors.

I welcome the renewed focus on the maritime sector in the wake of Brexit. Although it is right that we consider the role that ports play, we must also consider that role in the context of Brexit. The Department for Transport estimates that in 2017, 55% of international tonnage passing through UK major ports was to or from the EU. It is still our largest trading partner, accounting for 44% of our exports and 53% of our imports.

The Government’s chaotic handling of Brexit could cause tariffs to be imposed on exported goods, along with increased paperwork, inspections, audits and so forth. It could cause bottlenecks at ports here and on the continent. Security or customs delays could cause substantial tailbacks leading up to our ports as freight lorries are forced to pool while waiting for ports in France or the Netherlands to clear any backlogs that build up there.

The impact on ports such as Dover, where 99% of through trade is to or from the EU, will be substantial. Other ports, such as those that are members of the UK Major Ports Group, have suggested that they are investing substantially in infrastructure and capacity expansion, to be prepared for any eventuality. Sadly, it seems that the Government have yet to adequately prepare for the same. Towards the end of last year, at a hearing of the Public Accounts Committee, Her Majesty’s Revenue and Customs told Members of Parliament that the new customs declaration system would not be fully up and running in time for Brexit and that the system had not been designed with any increased customs processing in mind.

That is precisely why Labour has repeatedly called for a new customs agreement with the EU, to ensure that our businesses can continue to export tariff-free and without friction at the border. Today’s debate should perhaps have focused on that and the Government’s complete failure to ensure that our ports are supported in the event of any change to our current trade relationship with the EU. Nevertheless, we are here to debate the reintroduction of freeports. I say reintroduction because, as many Members have alluded to and will remember, the UK has already experimented with freeports at the ports of Liverpool, Southampton, Tilbury, Sheerness and Prestwick airport. Those freeports, established while we were a member of the European Union, were freeports in the true sense of the term: a defined area outside our customs territory, where goods could enter without attracting taxes or tariffs.

If the Government are considering whether to re-establish such a model, will the Minister tell us why, under the coalition Government, it was decided in 2012 that the freeports would not continue? Are we really talking about not a freeport per se, but a free trade or free enterprise zone, where goods can be manufactured and services rendered without being subject to the ordinary tax and/or legal regimes of this country?

Ministers, including the Under-Secretary of State for Housing, Communities and Local Government, the hon. Member for Richmond (Yorks) (Rishi Sunak), have suggested that the Government should consider adopting the American model of free trade zones, in which businesses would be given tax incentives to relocate. Although there may be evidence to demonstrate that such a model creates employment and attracts investment, very rarely is any assessment made of the extent to which those jobs and that investment are displaced, resulting in job losses and business closures elsewhere.

There is evidence around the world to suggest that such free trade zones are exploited by investors and businesses that seek to take advantage of general tax holidays and lax employment laws, while failing to produce the economic benefits promised.

Mr Simon Clarke: I thank the hon. Lady for highlighting the importance of EU trade, with which I completely agree. On displacing business from elsewhere, which is really important, I know from conversations with Ministers that that is at the heart of the Treasury’s concern to
ensure that we do not just end up shifting jobs from one part of our country to another. This is about winning business from outside the UK for the UK that otherwise would not be here. I do not believe, for example, that if we had a string of freeports around our country they would take jobs away from other port areas in the UK. It would be about winning new businesses and jobs.

Judith Cummins: I will come on to the importance of defining what is a freeport. A 2011 review of special economic zones by the World Bank suggested that many such models had become white elephants, with the cost of revenue lost to the Exchequer outweighing the benefits. At the same time, The Economist reported that they create distortions in economies and that many fail, leaving a long trail of failed zones that either never got going, were poorly run or in which investors gladly took tax breaks without producing substantial employment or export earnings.

Reports have repeatedly surfaced from free enterprise or free trade zones around the world that demonstrate lax enforcement of labour laws. Polish workers have been sacked for an illegal strike against poor working conditions at a business located in a special economic zone. There are similar examples in China, Cambodia and elsewhere. The European Parliament’s director general for external policies found that often in such zones “the governance of labour rights may differ from the rest of the country and fall below international legal standards”. If the Government are considering such a model, will they tell us how they intend to ensure that workers’ rights are protected and enforced? Will the Minister tell us what discussions he has had with trade unions?

Serious concerns have been raised about how a combination of tax incentives and relaxed monitoring and supervision, even by competent regulators, has resulted in a reduction in finance and trade controls and enforcement, creating opportunities for money laundering and the financing of terrorism. The intergovernmental Financial Action Task Force raised precisely those concerns in the inaugural review of free trade zones in 2015. It noted that “the same characteristics that make FTZs attractive to legitimate business also attract abuse by illicit actors”.

The Financial Action Task Force also noted that FTZs have been used in the transport and production of weapons of mass destruction.

Lee Rowley: I am grateful to the hon. Lady for outlining all the potential issues, but does that mean we should not have freeports because those things may happen?

Judith Cummins: I said at the beginning of my speech that this is a timely debate, because these things need to be said. However, until we get the deal we cannot rule anything in or out, because the devil is always in the detail.

The United Kingdom must not be allowed to become a bargain basement tax haven off the coast of Europe. That includes not allowing any schemes that would allow the abuse of workers’ rights, financial checks, export licencing regimes or money laundering checks. Although we recognise the various calls for a freeport review from industry groups, from the Key Cities group to the British Ports Association and the British Hospitality Association, we must note that it is only one aspect of their much larger call for coastal communities to have a strategy to ensure that investment and growth are facilitated across the UK. That includes investing in transport and infrastructure and improving port connectivity.

Today’s debate must not be used to mask failures by this Government: a failure to bring forward any coherent proposal for our future trading relationship with the EU; a failure to give our exporters any clarity about what their future trade environment looks like; a failure to adequately prepare for Brexit at our ports; a failure to properly invest in transport infrastructure; and a failure to develop any coherent plan to support economic growth and investment in our coastal communities.

I look forward to the Minister’s response to the points that other hon. Members and I have raised. My hon. Friend the Member for Redcar (Anna Turley) spoke eloquently of her local community; she shared her ambition for a freeport to unleash the economic potential in her area. All Members spoke about the importance of defining what we mean when we speak about freeports and the importance of rebalancing our economy. Crucially, I urge the Minister to commit today to consult properly with all Members of Parliament who represent potentially affected areas, because they deserve to be heard.

2.39 pm

The Exchequer Secretary to the Treasury (Robert Jenrick): It is a pleasure to respond to the debate. Like my hon. Friend the Member for North East Derbyshire (Lee Rowley), I represent one of the most landlocked constituencies in the country, although the River Trent is still tidal when it reaches Newark, so perhaps there is potential for a freeport in Newark one day.

I thank my hon. Friend the Member for Middlesbrough South and East Cleveland (Mr Clarke) and the right hon. Member for Birkenhead (Frank Field), who sadly could not be with us, for raising an important issue. This issue interests me a great deal. I engaged with it before I became a Minister, when I was involved in a proposal for a freeport around East Midlands airport, and in my business career before being elected to Parliament, when I visited and engaged with freeports in Geneva and Shanghai. I have seen both the advantages and the disadvantages of some of the freeports around the world.

I support the goals that underpin many of the arguments we have heard: increasing global trade at a pivotal moment for our country’s future; increasing economic development in all parts of the United Kingdom and inward investment in those parts that have seen less of it in recent years; supporting manufacturing and particularly advanced manufacturing that takes advantage of the new technologies that are transforming the way we produce products—we want to ensure the UK is at the heart of those new processes; and seeking new free market approaches to growing our economy. Those are a good thing in themselves and send positive signals about our country, our openness and our willingness to create a business-friendly environment for investment.

We have had a positive debate along all those lines. I reassure Members that the Treasury has engaged actively with stakeholders on this topic. We have already heard that my right hon. Friend the Chief Secretary to
the Treasury visited my hon. Friend the Member for Cleethorpes (Martin Vickers) in Immingham. She and I also visited the Tees Valley Mayor in the constituency of the hon. Member for Redcar (Anna Turley) to hear the proposals there, and we later met my hon. Friend the Member for Middlesbrough South and East Cleveland.

I held a roundtable at the Treasury earlier this year with the ports sector and the Minister with responsibility for ports. I listened to people’s ideas and enthusiasm about freeports and invited them to gather their thoughts and come back to us with substantive proposals, and I committed to giving those proposals the consideration they deserve. I remain keen to receive such proposals and to see what we might be able to achieve together.

Let me begin along the same lines as my hon. Friend. I visited the Tees Valley Mayor in the constituency of my hon. Friend the Member for Redcar (Anna Turley) to hear the proposals there, and we later met my hon. Friend the Member for Middlesbrough South and East Cleveland. As we heard, those zones were not redesignated in 2012, partly due to concerns about customs assurance around the type of free zone. Much though many of us would like to support free zones, it must be said that there was very little negative reaction to that. We understand that many of the companies that operated in those free zones now benefit in almost exactly the same way as they did before from customs facilitations the UK already offers. We have not received substantive proposals to revisit that.

Let me return to the example of Liverpool. Today, a manufacturer in Liverpool is able to gain all the benefits of a free zone without being constrained to locating within the free zone site. Setting aside large sites such as the south T ees site, some sites, including the one in Liverpool, are quite constrained and do not have the ability to become vast sites such as the one in Dubai we heard about.

If there was a ship manufacturer, for instance, in Liverpool or Birkenhead, materials for its vessels could be imported and stored in a customs warehouse somewhere in the Liverpool area, or anywhere else in the country, without duties being paid on them. The manufacturer or its supply chain could then use those materials in the manufacturing process under inward processing relief, and the finished ships could be exported without paying any UK customs duty ever having to be paid. That avoids the distortions and perverse geographical outcomes that would undoubtedly arise with free zones, where a manufacturer or its supply chain would feel the need to locate on the same site, although I appreciate that would undoubtedly arise with free zones, where a manufacturer or its supply chain would feel the need to locate on the same site, although I appreciate that would be beneficial to those locations, some of which require urgent inward investment.

The UK’s current customs facilitations offer broadly the same benefits that attract businesses to free zones in other developed countries, such as the United States. For example, two thirds of goods imported to US foreign trade zones are brought in to enjoy the same tariff-free manufacturing benefits offered by inward processing relief. The other third are stored in those zones, gaining the same cash-flow benefits offered by customs warehousing. From a customs perspective, the UK model compares favourably with the model in the United States—arguably more so because it does not force or encourage a company to locate in a particular place, but gives it the freedom to operate and trade wherever it wishes throughout the United Kingdom.

However, as Members would expect, we want to ensure we have an even more business-friendly environment, particularly as we leave the European Union. I am sure there are ways we can improve those customs arrangements, and we are actively engaged in identifying how we might do that now or post Brexit. We are open to suggestions from hon. Members, such as my hon. Friend the Member for Middlesbrough South and East Cleveland, who is very engaged with this issue. We are also actively engaged with people in some communities, including...
the Tees Valley Mayor and the hon. Member for Redcar, about how we might make those arrangements place-specific. That certainly could be taken forward.

As my hon. Friend said, if one agrees that the customs benefits are more limited because we have a fairly favourable customs arrangement—I have already described that—the wider question is how we can improve supply-side reforms and the business-friendly environment in the whole country or in particular places. In that regard, I draw Members’ attention to a couple of things on which we are focusing heavily.

Like many of those who have contributed to the debate, I want to see supply-side reforms to boost growth and support business. With the Chancellor and Chief Secretary, I have been highly engaged in efforts to increase productivity and regional growth in that way.

As the hon. Member for Redcar said, we should exercise caution because we do not want to propose ideas, whether in a freeport or another setting, that would lower environmental standards or indeed workers’ rights. We have been clear that we see leaving the European Union as an opportunity to not only protect those rights but enhance them. No proposals should be at the expense of the environment, workers’ rights or other things in our regulatory framework that we are proud of as a country and want to see continued or enhanced.

We are, however, highly engaged in how we can increase economic growth in particular places, either because they require it more than others, having received less investment in recent years, or because there is a significant national economic opportunity for growth that requires Government support. In that regard, we have made a number of interventions that build on a long history, to which my hon. Friend the Member for Middlesbrough South and East Cleveland referred, going back to the 1980s and the Thatcher revolution. They include locally led or mayoral development corporations—that power is available to the Mayor of Tees Valley. They also include enterprise zones, which the Government have expanded since 2010, creating many more in different combinations, including those linked to universities, which provide particular opportunities to help universities orientate themselves towards the local and regional economy, commercialise research and development, and help start-ups to scale up and achieve their potential. In some cases, those approaches have had the benefits that my hon. Friend described. Again, we are open to further conversations on how we might deliver them.

Development corporations empower places to overcome local barriers to growth and have provided a sharper commercial focus to large-scale Government investments to help develop local areas. In the Tees Valley, the first mayoral development corporation outside of London has been set up by the excellent local Mayor, Ben Houchen, whom I met only yesterday to discuss his future proposals.

At the Conservative party conference, we announced funding to boost growth and development in the east midlands between Nottingham and Leicester, creating a new locally led development corporation—around Toton. Again, that is an area of significant economic potential, and we want to use the levers available to us in central Government, working closely with local leadership and the business community, to take that forward at pace. The funding will support the area to move on with those announced proposals.

We are supporting local businesses particularly through enterprise zones—since 2012, we have established a further 48 of them—in all regions of the United Kingdom, including most of those represented here today, and certainly in the Tees Valley. In those zones, businesses benefit from tax and regulatory incentives. We have piloted other models, including, at the Budget last year, an east midlands-focused manufacturing zone to provide a more business-friendly environment for manufacturing businesses.

We are open to further conversations in that regard. We want to see more locally led models and development corporations and, as my hon. Friend the Member for Hornchurch and Upminster (Julia Lopez) said, more Canary Wharf-style opportunities to transform local areas and drive the economy forward at pace, with a particular focus on planning, where there is growing consensus for further liberalisation. There may be great opportunities to do so in these places if there is strong support from the local community, Mayors and the locally elected democratic leadership of councils.

As I told the ports when I met them earlier in the year, and as was said in the conversations the Chief Secretary has had with others, we believe there may be opportunities for some levers to be pulled with respect to ports. If they wish to take advantage of opportunities for locally led development corporations or those with a central Government component, we are happy to discuss that and see that moved forward as fast as possible.

We want to see further business-friendly customs arrangements put in place. Proposals for freeports would need to prove that they will genuinely attract inward investment into the United Kingdom and not simply displace growth that might have happened in other parts of the country. It must be an additive policy that makes the country more prosperous and does not simply move jobs and investment from other parts of the United Kingdom.

We are aware of the risks of free zones we see around the world relating to money laundering and other illicit activities—I saw that when I visited freeports, particularly with respect to the art market, which I worked in before being elected. We take note of the G7’s Financial Action Task Force. There are important questions that need to be explored and understood, and we must be sure that we overcome those risks before going further.

I thank my hon. Friend the Member for Middlesbrough South and East Cleveland for raising an important issue. Personally, I am highly engaged in it, along with the Chief Secretary. We want to see substantive proposals brought forward for us to consider, which can inform the debate and answer some of the questions that I and other Members have raised. How would free zones genuinely be additive and drive forward the prosperity of the whole United Kingdom? How can we overcome some of the disadvantages in terms of criminality and illicit trade that we have seen around the world? From a customs perspective, how would a freeport add something to our business-friendly customs environment that we do not have already? Keeping in mind the analyses and comments I have laid out? How can that play a part in our wider strategy to use devices such as development corporations or enterprise zones to help areas seize
economic opportunities, liberalise planning, build a business-friendly vision and attract business leadership to take forward their communities and economies?

This is an interesting and exciting opportunity worthy of further thought and consideration. I look forward to working with colleagues on both sides of the Chamber on it in the future.

2.57 pm

Mr Simon Clarke: I thank everyone who spoke in the debate. I particularly thank the Minister for sending out a really encouraging signal that there is serious engagement from the Government. The gauntlet is thrown down to us and the ports sector to make the proposition viable.

The hon. Member for Redcar (Anna Turley) set out a compelling case, which is close to my own heart, for why Teesport is such a great candidate to be a freeport if the initiative gets off the ground. Leaving aside what Harold Macmillan would term a little local difficulty about our positions on Brexit, I welcome the consensus that we have achieved. There is no suggestion that a freeport should, for example, weaken workers’ rights. It would be insanity as well as bad practice for us to do anything that took us down that route. This matter is about economic potential, not deregulation in that sense.

My hon. Friend the Member for Cleethorpes (Martin Vickers) is such a doughty champion. I am so pleased that he set up the all-party group. Obviously, his area, like mine, could benefit enormously from making a go of freeports. He pointed out that the initiative is perfectly designed for northern communities that have been left behind. It is absolutely about embracing the opportunities of Brexit, as he rightly said.

My hon. Friend the Member for Hornchurch and Upminster (Julia Lopez) spoke. It is rare that I get the chance to praise London and the opportunities that it offers. It is true that London is a complex and diverse city. The idea that it is all Bentleys and million-pound homes in Sloane Square is not true. It is important that places like Havering get to benefit from initiatives such as the logistics hub. The hon. Member for Redcar and I are working on promoting such a bid for Teesside—nothing passes without Teesside getting a mention. Logistics hubs are a great idea and Havering seems to me to have many of the characteristics that would make it a successful location.

Mr Peter Bone in the Chair

My hon. Friend the Member for North East Derbyshire (Lee Rowley) has emerged as the foremost champion of social and economic liberalism within my intake of Conservative MPs. He rightly identifies that we need to be nimble, dynamic and fearless as we leave the European Union. If we are to do that, I think freeports are a great opportunity. I wish him luck working out how to get the sea a little bit closer to North East Derbyshire.

The hon. Member for Dunfermline and West Fife (Douglas Chapman) eloquently set out his party’s position on Brexit. He is absolutely right about the importance of EU trade. I draw him back to my point that current EU state aid rules restrict us from creating freeports in a way that would allow them to succeed. He made his own powerful case for Rosyth to form part of a freeport, which was such a policy to be initiated. He is certainly right to pay tribute to the work of the UK ports sector in helping us to prepare for today’s debate.

The hon. Member for Bradford South (Judith Cummins) rightly highlighted the importance of EU trade. We struck genuine cross-party consensus that this must not be an opportunity to deregulate things that are important to all of us, including hard-won advances in workers’ rights. It did seem slightly ironic that she took the Government to task over the lack of clarity on Brexit. I lose track of the exact position of the Opposition on this point, but it is fair to say that it is difficult for all parties, and we need to bear that in mind.

More broadly, I hope that Labour can find a way to make this policy a part of its platform, as it has enormous potential for many Labour constituencies. The fact that the hon. Member for Redcar is here and the fact that the right hon. Member for Birkenhead (Frank Field), a friend whom I admire greatly, is the co-sponsor of the debate, shows that this idea goes to the heart of regenerating places that have had a really raw deal over the last 30 years and have really struggled with the challenges of deindustrialisation. They could potentially benefit enormously from making this policy work. I certainly do not think we need to worry about her colourful suggestion about the transport of weapons of mass destruction. I promise now that Teesport will not become a centre for that—it is the only thing that I will rule out for Teesside.

I turn to the points made by the Exchequer Secretary to the Treasury, my hon. Friend the Member for Newark (Robert Jenrick). It was a huge pleasure to welcome him to Skelton a few weeks ago; we had a really good visit. I know he is one of the most thoughtful and effective champions of enterprise in Government and someone who I think will go right to the very top of Government—he certainly deserves to. It is great to hear about his close engagement with the ports sector and he is right that the onus now passes to the sector to come up with workable, serious proposals. We have expanded upon the intellectual framework for why this could work and it is now about getting the granularity of detail that the Government require to make it happen.

Whatever the framework within which we choose to leave the European Union, it must allow the broadest possible powers for future enterprise. That takes me back to my point about Chequers. I really do want to see supply side benefits realised. There is a particular opportunity at a time when the Government have embraced a place-based industrial strategy to make the case for areas like the Humber and South Tees, where there are enormous brownfield sites. I appreciate there are ports that are constrained, such as Dover and Liverpool, but there are others where the potential is unlimited—as much land as is needed can be given. This is something that is exciting and it resonates.

It would be wrong of me to close without paying tribute to the work of Ben Houchen and the whole regeneration initiative, which is making a huge impact cross-party. It is getting people’s hopes up in places like South Tees. Sometimes it is not just about changing the economic reality but about changing the intellectual and emotional response to where we are now. We have had one narrative for a long time and hopefully we are starting to get into a much more enterprising and forward-looking mood in our area. This is an exciting and hugely challenging time. There will be great opportunities and pitfalls in the months and years ahead. That is what comes when one takes back control
of policy. Today has crystallised the next steps that we are going to have to take in order to make freeports a serious, workable prospect for our future.

Question put and agreed to.

Resolved,
That this House has considered the establishment of freeports in the UK.

3.3 pm
Sitting adjourned.
Mike Hill: I take the hon. Gentleman’s point and will come to it later. I have heard the voice of the BHA and it has tried to effect change.

According to the petitioners, nearly 200 horses are killed on racecourses each year. Others are taken away injured and die later, but do not appear in any industry figures. Horses are whipped as normal practice. Rule-breaking abuse with the whip runs to more than 500 offences a year, committed by 260 jockeys or more. That alone is a damning indictment of the BHA’s failings, and there are other issues, which I will come to. A point of progress noted by the BHA at our meeting was the fact that it now counts horses that have died off the racetrack.

The BHA has lacked urgency and has failed to take pragmatic steps when horses have been killed. If racing has a bad name in the media, that has been brought on by a failure to acknowledge and act. Let me read just a few headlines that expose the deficiencies: “Record number of thoroughbreds being slaughtered for meat”, “Jockey banned after…punching horse”, “Three horses die within 30 minutes at Hexham races leading to calls for an inquiry”, “Worcester Racecourse is among worst venues for horse safety”, and “Plumpton described as ‘death trap’…six horses died in just nine days of racing”.

Of course, there was also the recent Cheltenham incident. Such headlines are written because of the public interest in animal welfare, which is ever growing—a point that the petition’s signatories have made clear.

Tim Farron (Westmorland and Lonsdale) (LD): The hon. Gentleman is making extremely good points. Many people, including me, think that the BHA has many qualities and many good people, and serves an important role. However, does he agree that the BHA has so many responsibilities, of which animal welfare is only one, that it is very hard for it to exercise that responsibility as well as it might? Put bluntly, the conflict of interest between promoting the sport and protecting animal welfare ought to lead us to conclude that there should be an independent body.

Mike Hill: Yes. The petitioners’ point is that there is a conflict of interest.

John Spellar (Warley) (Lab): A whole number of realms of life are subject to scrutinised self-regulation by people who actually know the profession, industry or walk of life in question. We may look for improvements, but why would we want to take regulation away from the people who have a long-term interest in sustaining the industry and who have the support of the millions who follow racing, either by going to races or by watching them on television?

Mike Hill: That is, of course, a perfectly appropriate point to make, and the BHA in particular would agree. As I said, I have sat down with the BHA and it has made improvements in areas where it recognises that they are required.

I will cite examples to make the case that racehorses have been failed by the BHA, and set out why the BHA should lose its horse welfare remit and be replaced by an independent body that has horse welfare as its only concern.

The problem is nothing new; it is historical. The rich and politically influential people in racing have always had their hands on the reins. They have controlled all...
aspects since they chose to self-regulate the sport back in 1750, just a few streets away from here, in a Pall Mall gentlemen’s club called the Jockey Club. Their stranglehold on power, and for a short period that of jump racing’s National Hunt Committee, existed until this century, when it married for a few years with a fledgling authority, the Horseracing Regulatory Authority. In 2007, those authorities gave birth to the current incumbent, the BHA.

This is a blue-blooded family who maintain power. Their relatives maintain control too. Weatherby’s, racing’s private administrator and registrar of thoroughbred births and deaths, has since 1770 and for seven family generations enjoyed direct involvement in the fully integrated sport of breeding, racing and disposing of thoroughbreds. Much of the information that it gathers on racehorses is kept private, but in some circumstances it can be bought.

According to the petitioners, this is an exclusive old boys’ club run like a masonic lodge with friends in Government. Through the ages, the Government have left this racing club in full control, rarely intervening in horse welfare matters. Parliament has seen few discussions on the subject. The last time any serious debate took place here was in 1954, when Lord Ammon rose to ask “whether the attention of Her Majesty’s Government has been directed to the disaster on the Aintree racecourse during the Grand National Steeplechase on Saturday, 27th March when 29 horses started, of which 20, including four killed, failed to finish the course; whether the law concerning cruelty to animals applies in such cases, and to move for Papers.”

He went on to say:

“Nor is that all the story; hundreds of the horses who fail are not heard of again. It is difficult to get news about them”. He was talked down by Earl Winterton, who—with the support of the Under-Secretary of State for the Home Department, Lord Lloyd—rejected Government intervention, stating that

“it would be a pity if it went out from your Lordships’ House that there was undue criticism here. Surely we should leave the appropriate authorities”

—by which he meant racing’s self-regulating National Hunt Committee—

“to consider what has been said…and decide what course they should take”. [Official Report, House of Lords, 6 April 1954; Vol. 186, c. 1041-1049.]

Perhaps not unsurprisingly, the self-regulators did not take any course of action.

I mention that historical debate because, importantly, the same scenario is being played out today. Like Lord Ammon, I ask whether Her Majesty’s Government are aware that three horses died just weeks ago in a single afternoon’s racing at Perth racecourse. Is the horse welfare regulator—the BHA—going to make any changes to the racecourse or to the conditions of the races at Perth, to prevent this from happening again? Were the Government or anyone else aware that, more alarmingly, this is the second time that three horses have died in a day’s racing at Perth? After their deaths in August 2016, the BHA failed to act, making no changes and learning no lessons. As a consequence, horses have had to be killed yet again. Just as its predecessor for jump racing, the National Hunt Committee, walked away from horse deaths back in 1954, the BHA is doing the same—and this, of course, when the deaths do not make the headlines.

One might think that horses are racing’s most valuable assets. That is perhaps so for horses such as Frankel, Galileo or Kew Gardens, who are making millions of pounds for their owners, but maybe not for elderly brood mares and former racehorses such as Maidment or Marilouise. These are just two of 23 thoroughbreds, some pregnant and one with a foal at foot, who were taken at the eleventh hour from a bankrupt stud in Newmarket—the beating heart of British racing. Those horses were not saved with the support of the racing industry or the BHA but by Hillside animal sanctuary, a rescue centre that relies on public donations to feed and care for unwanted animals. Had Hillside not taken them into its care just a few weeks ago, on 17 September, those horses, including the foal, would have been destroyed—they were pre-booked for 18 September at 11 am. Fortunately for the BHA’s high-profile public image campaign, The Horse Comes First, and its flagship Retraining of Racehorses scheme, ROR, that desperate rescue of 23 vulnerable racehorses and broodmares, who were down on their luck, did not hit the national headlines.

That highlights the major welfare issue of overbreeding, and likewise what to do with the thousands of horses who face ejection by the industry each year, which in effect is the very same problem. In 2008, the Irish Republic, which is the supply centre of half the horses who are trained and raced in Britain, was hit by the global economic recession. British Racing, led by the BHA, stood by and watched an exponential rise in slaughter figures, from just over 2,000 in 2008 to 24,000 in 2012.

John Spellar: My recollection is that the global financial crisis also led to a crisis in horse-owning more generally, quite apart from horse-racing. I am not clear whether the perfectly legitimate line that my hon. Friend is taking quite apart from horse-racing. I am not clear whether

Mike Hill: I remind my right hon. Friend that I am a member of the Petitions Committee and I am quoting the facts and figures of the petitioners on this occasion. Abattoirs sprung up almost overnight to cater for the demand for the disposal of unwanted horses. In the cruelest terms, Irish and British horse-racing had gone from a sport to a food producer. Young foals and those at the end of the careers, the injured or slow, poor-performing stallions and mediocre brood mares similar to Maidment and Marilouise, who Hillside took in just weeks ago, were turned into meat for human consumption or fed to hunting hounds, while others were rendered down to be mixed into everyday products. That massacre of the sport’s equine competitors was the result of a lack of foresight and strategic planning for the future, the ignorance of potential outcomes and the sheer apathy of a self-regulated industry. The average punter and Royal Ascot celebrity would never know this secret, because of a lack of transparency and a closed door to freedom of information.

Since that animal welfare disaster, the BHA has failed to put limits on breeding numbers. One hundred years ago, a top stallion would cover—a polite way of saying mate—with 15 mares. Around 35 years ago, stallions such as the ill-fated Shergar would cover 40 at best. This year, we are seeing single stallions cover 100, 200 or even 300 mares. It is irresponsible, and the BHA stands by and lets it happen. It is as bad as any unscrupulous dog breeder who has hit the news in recent years—behaviour that eventually brought about a change to the law.
The burgeoning racing fixtures list, drawn up to accommodate the swell of horses being bred, will be the biggest ever in 2019, with over 1,500 meetings. It will not meet the needs of a huge number of horses who will not win a race and will earn little or no prize money, and who will then be quickly cast out and replaced by another on the conveyor belt of horses that pass through the industry, which brings me on to racing itself.

When a horse steps on to a British racecourse, its welfare and protection from potential suffering should be paramount. Yet each horse has about a one in 50 chance of not surviving a year in racing. The BHA likes to minimise that alarming figure by stating that just 0.2% of runners die in racing, although if a horse runs 10 times and dies, that is classed as one in 10 runners. It is confusing and deliberately misleading. The disrespect shown by classing horses’ deaths as a percentage of runners, and the BHA’s unwillingness to name individual horses who are killed in an understandable and comprehensive list, as is done in Ireland, led the campaign group Animal Aid to launch its own online website, Race Horse Death Watch, where one can see the names of ill-fated horses and the racecourses where they died. It has become an endless list and makes for disturbing viewing.

Why do horses die racing? Is it by accident, as the BHA cited in the death of a two-year-old colt last month at Doncaster, or are horse deaths to some extent preventable? In the case of the two-year-old, the BHA shamefully absolved itself and the racecourse of any responsibility for the young horse’s death. I will go through the account of an eyewitness who saw this tragedy unfold. An inexperienced two-year-old colt known as Commanding Officer entered an enclosed starting stall from which to race. The horse became frightened and reared in an attempt to free himself from the all-enveloping stall. Instead of removing this panic-stricken, novice horse from the race, it was decided to blindfold him in the hope of eventually getting him to run. Without his vision, and with natural equine fear, he reared again in the starting stall. The poor design of stalls enabled Commanding Officer to trap a foreleg between the front gates. As he pulled back, blind, to free himself, his foreleg snapped into two as the gates held firmly shut. By design, there is, surprisingly, no quick-release mechanism on the gates to free individual horses from stalls. As a consequence, the colt’s hoof and five inches of bare cannon bone—his shin—were hanging off the end of his leg, held by just a tenuous flap of skin.

The horse was eventually destroyed, but not without immense suffering. The eyewitness described the horse’s destruction as “unbelievable”, and a load of empty syringes were thrown over the screens—those would have contained a deadly cocktail of drugs in a vain attempt to inject the scared and injured animal. The race was held up but still went ahead. As the other horses set off running, Commander Officer’s dead body lay in a white horsebox parked next to the stalls. He was two years old—just a baby.

Shockingly, the BHA stewards’ report of events stated that “the BHA’s Equine Health and Welfare department...found that the starting and loading procedures were followed correctly, and that the injury sustained by Commanding Officer was an accident.”

There was no mention of the inability to quickly open the stall gates to free the horse. That might have been the end of the story, but it is not. At a previous meeting at the very same racecourse, Doncaster, an identical fatal injury happened that was similarly caused by the poor design of the stalls. An experienced horse known as Mukaynis caught his left foreleg in the starting stall gates when, yet again, the horse’s vision was compromised by a hood. Mukaynis, with restricted vision, was startled by a stalls handler. The gelding reared, the gates trapping a leg. Perhaps the BHA thinks that lightning cannot strike twice and crosses it fingers—it did not act after Mukaynis lost his life, and the young Commanding Officer has now lost his life, too. Both horses were failed by poor practice that could have been resolved with basic insight and cost-effective physical changes to starting stall gates.

That is not the only problem. The BHA’s crude reporting of events should also be scrutinised. The race-day stewards, who are mostly amateurs, are commissioned by and under guidance from the BHA, and are meant to monitor the races, take action, note any concerning matters and report them in the official BHA documents. The stewards reported that both horse victims were “unruly in the stalls”. Their report did not even acknowledge that Mukaynis was dead. The BHA allows anthropomorphic terms to be used to describe fear in an equine that is confined in an unnatural manner and unable to escape when panicked.

I could talk into the night about other heart-wrenching cases in which stewards failed to monitor or report welfare issues. Many racehorse deaths could easily have been avoided if the tired horses that had no chance of winning were simply pulled up. Horses are literally run into the ground: they are forced to race without having time to recover from the previous races.

I have spoken to the BHA, and it has talked about making improvements in the areas that I have condemned. It says that it reviews deaths, but its Cheltenham review came about only because of the public and media outcry over the death of six horses at this year’s festival meeting. It published no review of the 2017 festival and did not even mention the five horses that died during it, or the seven that were killed in 2016. The media failed to pick up on those deaths, so the BHA remained silent. It takes the wrath of public opinion to make it look into deaths, let alone take responsibility for them.

The BHA states that it has spent £33 million since 2017 on veterinary research and education. That sum may sound reasonable, but the BHA grossed more than £1.8 billion during that time, and it equates to less than 2% of expenditure. It is about £150 per horse—less money than a jockey’s riding fee for one race. Racing is a rich industry and can afford to increase its welfare budget. If it does not, horses will continue to pay the price of the underspend with their lives.

The petitioners call on the Government to act by removing the British Horseracing Authority from its role as welfare regulator for racehorses, while allowing it to retain its other roles in racing, and to replace the BHA with an independent body that is responsible only for horse welfare.
from racecourses and racing bodies from time to time, and I am co-chairman, with the hon. Member for St Helens North (Conor McGinn), of the all-party parliamentary racing and bloodstock industries group. I very much welcome this debate, which gives us the opportunity to discuss how to improve the welfare of racehorses in the United Kingdom, because I am also the proud Member of Parliament for Tewkesbury, which includes the Cheltenham racecourse—one of the greatest in the world. It generates a lot of income, which helps the whole area. Tewkesbury is a rural area, and horses are very much part of the rural scene. The petition attracted 313 signatories from Tewkesbury, demonstrating that there is a love of horses there and a concern that they should be properly looked after.

I have a personal interest in this issue: my wife owns horses and has done so all her life. She trains them and competes, not in racing but in other sports. I am an animal lover—we keep farm animals as pets, and we have had pets all our lives—so I want to see what we can do to build on the good work that has already been done to ensure that racehorses are well cared for, not only during their racing careers but afterwards.

It will be heartwarming to the BHA, as I do not always agree with it on everything, to hear me say that I believe it is doing a good and improving job of looking after the welfare of racehorses. Although it is involved in racing, it is independent of racecourses, jockeys, owners and the other racing bodies. It does work on the fixture list, the integrity of the sport—it makes sure it is clean—and welfare. It has a board of 10 members. One comes from racecourses and one from another body connected to racing, but the majority are independent of those bodies, so they can carry out their work completely without bias. They investigate jockeys and trainers, and sometimes come down very hard on them. They have demonstrated their ability to do that as well as their independence.

Jim Shannon (Strangford) (DUP): As the hon. Member for Hartlepool (Mike Hill) mentioned, the Irish racehorse sector already has self-regulated through law. Does the hon. Member for Tewkesbury (Mr Robertson) feel that, to safeguard the lucrative racehorse sector in the United Kingdom, it is vital that we follow the Republic of Ireland’s lead?

Mr Robertson: I will come to that issue in a minute, but the hon. Gentleman makes a very good point. Everybody in racing wants horses to be protected, largely because they love them. Owners pay a lot of money for racehorses, and training fees are some £20,000 a year, so purely from a financial point of view the last thing they want is for anything bad to happen to their horses. That is not what motivates them, but they put an awful lot of money into the sport.

The hon. Member for Hartlepool (Mike Hill) said that racing is a rich industry, but those of us who know it know that it is impoverished. The top 1% are rich, but lots of trainers and jockeys earn very little. Owners get back an average of 23% of the total cost. That is not a return—they lose 77% of everything they put in. They do it for the love of the sport, and it costs them a lot of money, so the last thing they want is for horses to be treated badly on the racecourse or in the stables. They simply would not allow that to happen.

A number of charities care for racehorses, some of which might have been involved in motivating this petition, and the all-party parliamentary group, which I have co-chaired for a number of years, raises money for some of them at a charity dinner in the House of Commons. Retraining of Racehorses, which is not one that we raise money for, does an excellent job of looking after racehorses after they have finished their racing careers. Greatwood—from memory, I think we raised about £50,000 for it in this place a few years ago—does great work in bringing retired racehorses together with disadvantaged young people. It is unfortunate that that work is not recognised as often as it should be.

Even people who are not as into racing as me are captured by the excitement, particularly that of the big race meetings. I mentioned the Cheltenham festival, but there is also the Grand National, Royal Ascot and the Derby. Those races capture the imagination of people not just in this country but across the world, who take a great interest in it. I have travelled the world to watch racing—I was in France just the other week—and, without question, British racing is the best in the world, although Irish racing is also extremely good. In this country, racing contributes some £3.5 billion to the economy and £275 million in tax. Some 17,400 people are directly employed in the industry full time, and another 85,000 are indirectly employed. It really does do a lot for this country, particularly in rural areas.

I am concerned to ensure that we do the absolute best for racehorses, so I am not instinctively against having an extra body to look after them, but I wonder if it is the best way forward. As I have said, the BHA, which is independent of other bodies in racing, is doing a good and improving job. One of the problems in racing is that there are already too many bodies. As well as the BHA, there is the Horsemen’s Group, the Racecourse Association, the Racehorse Owners Association, the Professional Jockeys Association, the National Trainers Federation, racecourse groups and probably a few other organisations that I have not remembered. I am not convinced therefore that bringing in another body would help and I am not sure to whom it would report or how independent it would actually be.

That goes back to the point raised by the right hon. Member for Warley (John Spellar), who asked whether it is not better for people with long-standing expertise in racing and caring for horses to carry out that overview and supervise the work with racehorses. I am persuaded that that is probably the best way to continue, but that is not to say that improvements cannot be made. They have been made over the past few years: the number of fillers has, on average, been reduced, the fatality rate has thankfully been reduced, and there have been changes to the layout of racecourses, to the fences, and to whip regulations. Although those big improvements have been made, I emphasise that I am not satisfied with where we are. We must continue to move forward and I certainly want to continue working with the BHA in order to help it to do so, but that is the best way forward rather than creating another body.

Cheltenham spends hundreds of thousands of pounds a year on veterinary and welfare fees, and other racecourses spend an awful lot of money ensuring that the horses are properly checked and fit to run and that there are no problems. I accept that there is some way to go, but I think that racing is a very clean sport in this country.
There are very few examples of drugs being given to horses, of any wrongdoing in betting, or of race fixing— they all happen very rarely. It is a good and clean sport but one that can and should improve, and I believe that it is doing so.

I should like to hear the Minister’s opinion. My view is that the BHA should take the issue forward and, perhaps, its structure could be altered or it could report more to the Government. I am not saying that changes are not needed in that respect, but I think that is the way forward. I am very grateful to the hon. Member for Hartlepool for introducing the debate in the way that he did, and I look forward to hearing what other hon. Members have to say.

5.3 pm

Rachel Maskell (York Central) (Lab/Co-op): It is good to see you in the Chair, Mr Wilson. I thank my hon. Friend the Member for Hartlepool (Mike Hill) for introducing the debate, and I also thank those constituents of mine who have written to me and encouraged me to attend it.

York is home to Britain’s second oldest racecourse—it was established in 1731—and on Saturday I had a behind-the-scenes tour and saw all that occurs on race day. The racecourse plays a significant role in York’s economy, bringing in about £58 million. It hosts races for 18 days a year and it also hosts many events on the Knavesmire stand. I thank William Derby, the racecourse chief executive, as well as his staff, for the programme he laid on for me and Councillor Jonny Crawshaw, who represents Micklegate ward.

I observed many aspects of the racecourse hosting an event, including security and policing— particularly for antisocial behaviour and terrorism—as well as stewarding, chapelnic services, hospitality and gambling, but I also paid particular attention to the welfare of the horses, toured their new facilities and met the vets. The racecourse upgraded its facilities in 2015, including building new tepid and cold water showers for horses post-race; installing a mist fan, based on data from the Olympics that showed how best to keep horses cool; and building an equine hospital facility on the site. York also has an equine hospital, to which injured horses can rapidly be transferred should the need occur. I witnessed the horses warming up for a race and cooling down afterwards. Clearly, I did not see the entire impact of a race on a horse, but I discussed some examples with the vets, such as the potential impact of the stress placed on a horse’s lungs, and internal and soft tissue injuries.

On Saturday, when speaking with the lead vet from Minster Equine veterinary clinic and others, I was reassured that animal welfare is of prime importance to the racecourse, and that the recent investment demonstrated such a commitment. Of the 1,300 horses that have raced this season, there has been one fatality. In 2016 there were three fatalities; in 2014 there were two; in 2013 there were two; in 2012 there were three; and in 2011 there was one. That is 12 fatalities in seven years, which is clearly devastating. Moreover, given that York hosts flat racing, they are also 12 fatalities too many. I should also like to point out that this feeds a gambling industry.

It is clear that much more research is needed on animal welfare and horse welfare. I observed the rehabilitation of horses from injuries resulting from races. As a physiotherapist, I was particularly interested in how horses are rehabilitated and in why more research is not done to ensure that those that sustain such injuries are given more intense rehabilitation to increase their chances of survival. However, it is only by having a comprehensive understanding of the causation of injury that risks can be eliminated. I therefore believe that an independent regulator, which could explore why injuries occur, would be invaluable to the industry. The fact that it would be independent would be helpful for the British Horseracing Authority, as well as to those people working throughout the industry. We should welcome the opportunity for more, rather than less, scrutiny in horse-racing: if there is nothing to hide, there is nothing to fear. We have heard about the conflicts of interest that occur within the BHA, so having an animal welfare champion at the core of horse-racing would be a positive step forward.

On Saturday, I observed a delay at the start line. The horses were in the starting stalls when one decided to dip under the stall and escape. That horse experienced only minor injuries, but the other horses were clearly distressed. I would like to examine what more can be done to limit the distress and stress experienced by horses at the start of a race. One horse, for instance, tried to gallop out of the stalls but it was constrained by the gates; its stress increased with each moment but the gates remained closed. Other horses were taken out of the stalls, calmed down, and then placed back in them, but the stress was clearly building. The cases of Mukaynis and Commanding Officer demonstrate that more work needs to be done on that particular pinch point. An independent body could consider those issues and improve safety for horses.

I followed the race with a doctor, to observe what their role was and how fast medical support was provided. I was puzzled as to why doctors were ahead of vets in the queue and why they did not move around the racecourse in tandem. Vets should be able to reach the scene of an injured horse with the same expediency as doctors are able to access injured individuals. Perhaps that issue could also be looked at.

During the day, I also made inquiries about the use of the whip, because that has been raised with me on a number of occasions. I understand that whip safety has improved over time. It was pointed out that use of the whip has two functions: first, for steering the horse, which can prevent injury; and, secondly, for “encouragement”. I understand that the air cushion on the whip provides protection, but evidence from Animal Aid indicates a lack of confidence about whether a whip injures or hurts a horse. Again, therefore, I believe that an independent body could look into such issues, building confidence whichever way the debate falls. Evidence from an independent regulator could settle an issue such as that of use of the whip in a race. In Norway, to ensure animal welfare, a whip is not used. We need to understand how “encouragement”, if it does not hurt a horse and is to continue, can be made subject to good regulation, because the current penalties hardly discourage the use of the whip. That, too, should be reviewed.

The vet also highlighted risks to the horse once it leaves horse-racing, because that environment is less well regulated, and raised one or two issues. In the afterlife of horses, I want to ensure that we take the greatest care of these precious animals, particularly in their breeding. This House has had many a debate about dog breeding. In order to ensure that animal...
welfare is upheld, it is clear that regulation of the number of foals that a mare may produce needs to be tightened, and the same applies to regulation for stallion welfare.

Nic Dakin (Scunthorpe) (Lab): I apologise for arriving slightly late—I was on a Statutory Instrument Committee. My hon. Friend makes an important point about unregulated breeding. The situation has changed significantly in recent years and an independent regulator would make a real difference.

Rachael Maskell: I thank my hon. Friend for his observation. I trust that the Minister will respond to that particular point.

Many organisations are doing phenomenal work to oversee the welfare of retired racehorses. In Yorkshire, the charity New Beginnings has been registered in the past few years. It relaxes and settles horses before retraining them for a further career, domestic purposes or other uses. I have also visited the Hillside animal wellbeing centre, which gives phenomenal support to animals, but we need to understand what percentage of animals have the opportunity for a second life. It is the horses that we do not hear about that are the cause of most concern and that the petitioners have brought to our attention.

We need tight regulation, so what is wrong with having an independent regulator to log not only the injuries and fatalities while horses are in racing, but what happens to them after racing? Enthusiasts and people in general would be able to follow the horses’ life course. Transparency is all that is being called for, but it could make such a difference to confidence in horse-racing, instead of everything being left to the BHA, which, as we have heard, already has many responsibilities placed on it. Greater scrutiny would build confidence, and the petitioners are therefore wise to call for it.

Before I close, I want to make a couple of other points about horse welfare associated with the sport. The BHA or an independent regulator might also have a perspective on these issues. First, as we move into a Brexit scenario, given the 26,000 horse movements across European Union borders, delays at a border will clearly have an impact on horse welfare. It would be good to hear from the Minister how he will ensure against animal welfare issues arising. Secondly, given that so many trainers and stable staff come from eastern Europe or Ireland, and that they are not, as we have heard, well paid by the industry, what opportunity will they have to continue to work? Any sudden exit by staff would jeopardise horse welfare, too. What preparations are the Government making to protect horses in such an environment?

I again thank York racecourse for opening its doors to me so that I could look behind the scenes and have better understanding of issues appertaining to horse welfare. I thank the petitioners for raising this important issue and for the measured proposal for independent regulation in horse-racing. We should all reflect on the value of horse-racing to the horse—we need to put the horse at the centre—as well as to other parts of the industry.

5.15 pm

Philip Davies (Shipley) (Con): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Mr Wilson. I was not planning to speak in this debate, because I had tabled some amendments to the Offensive Weapons Bill, but the party Whips decided against holding that debate, presumably so that I might speak in this one. I therefore thought it would be rude not to take up the opportunity. I do not want to speak for long, but I want to support my hon. Friend the Member for Tewkesbury (Mr Robertson), who set out clearly the case not only for horse-racing but for how well the BHA regulates horse-racing and in particular horse welfare. Like him, I have had my disagreements with the BHA, so I am not someone who automatically and naturally jumps to support it.

I should make it clear, as my hon. Friend did, that people ought to refer to my entry in the register of Members’ interests because, on a number of occasions, I too have received hospitality at the races, including at York racecourse, where I was on Saturday—as was the hon. Member for York Central (Rachael Maskell). I should add that I do not own any racehorses at the moment, although I have done so in the past. I would say that I was a modest owner of racehorses and an owner of very modest horses at that. The hon. Member for Hartlepool (Mike Hill), who led the debate, talked about the great riches in racing, but I assure everyone that I was not participating at that kind of level. My horses participated at the standard not of the Ebor meeting at York, but more of a Saturday evening at Wolverhampton. I should make that clear.

I will add to some of the points made by my hon. Friend the Member for Tewkesbury and respond to a few of the other points made so far. I shall do the latter first, if I may. The hon. Member for Westmorland and Lonsdale (Tim Farron), who unfortunately is no longer in his place, has Cartmel racecourse in his constituency—I might be wrong about that, but I do not think so—and I hope that he is a supporter of it, but he said something quite extraordinary. He said that it was incompatible for a regulator to promote a sport and to be responsible for animal welfare, but I think that the two go essentially hand in hand. How on earth can a body promote a sport such as horse-racing without a clear commitment to animal welfare? For the life of me, I could not understand his argument. For me, the two are perfectly compatible and must go hand in hand.

We also heard earlier, I think from the hon. Member for Hartlepool, that horses have no choice, unlike jockeys and so on. I have to say, that that is not entirely true, for two reasons. For example, a few years ago there was a terrible tragedy when the Cheltenham Gold Cup winner Synchronised, favourite for the Grand National that very same year, died. Synchronised ran in the Grand National and fell, but it did not die when it fell with the jockey on board; it died afterwards, after it fell for a second time, running loose and jumping the fences with the rest of the field. That horse did have a choice. It was loose—it had no jockey on its back. It carried on because horses love jumping. They love running, they love racing and they love jumping. There was a terrible outcome in that case—it is in the figures the hon. Member for Hartlepool referred to—but that horse did have a choice. It wanted to carry on with the rest of the field, because horses love running, racing and jumping.

Mr Robertson: I was at Aintree when that sad incident took place. Has my hon. Friend ever sat on a horse? If he has, he will know that it is simply not possible to get a horse to do anything it does not want to do.
Philip Davies: My hon. Friend is absolutely right. That was going to be my very next point. A horse weighs approximately half a tonne. A flat jockey at York on Saturday would have weighed roughly 8 or 8½ stone. I assure Members that there is no way on God’s earth that an 8½-stone jockey will force half a tonne of horse to do something it really does not want to do. If it digs its heels in and decides it will not go into the starting stalls, it will not go into the starting stalls, and there is nothing an 8-stone jockey can do to force it to. If a horse does not want to set off at the start of a steeplechase, no jockey will be able to force it to.

That happens from time to time. Horses are wilful and intelligent creatures. They are not stupid. When they get to the racecourse, they know they are at the racecourse and they are there to race. Believe me, when horses decide to set off, they do so of their own volition. Many racehorses decline to race—they do not come out of the stalls and do not set off. That happens from time to time—regrettably, usually when I have backed one.

Dr Lisa Cameron (East Kilbride, Strathaven and Lesmahagow) (SNP): The hon. Gentleman is making a thorough speech, but he fails to point out that horses are trained to jump and race—those things do not exactly come to a horse naturally. Horses that are not trained, such as those we see in fields as we drive by on the motorway or a country road, do not jump fences automatically just because they naturally love to jump.

Philip Davies: I do not accept that. Racehorses are not just trained to race—they are bred to race, and they naturally want to race. That is their natural state of being. I do not accept the hon. Lady’s premise that racehorses, if they were not in a trainer’s yard, would have no interest at all in racing one another. That is what they naturally want to do, and it is what they naturally do.

Someone mentioned the whip. I encourage people to get hold of a whip and hit themselves with it quite hard. They will find it does not actually hurt at all. Whips are not used for that purpose. If someone wants a horse to run faster, they do not hurt it. By definition, a hurt horse will not run faster, just like someone who is injured while running will not run faster as a result of being hurt. Yes, the whip is used to encourage a horse. It is often used for safety reasons, to ensure that a horse runs in a straight line and does not deviate and put other horses and riders in danger. There is a lot of misunderstanding about the use of the whip in horse-racing. Again, a horse will not run faster if it has been injured.

The hon. Member for Hartlepool said racing was run by the “blue-blooded” brigade. I do not know whether more than a few of us have met Nick Rust, the chief executive of the British Horseracing Authority, but I am not sure he would recognise that description. Perhaps he would—perhaps I do him a disservice—but I think most people in the Chamber would accept that he is from a very humble, modest and down-to-earth background. Describing people such as him as “blue-blooded” does them a gross disservice.

Mike Hill: Of course I recognise that horse-racing is not only the sport of kings—allegedly—but the sport of the working man. However, as a member of the Petitions Committee, I reflected the views of the petitioners. To answer the hon. Gentleman, yes I can ride a horse, but I missed out from my speech the fact that both the BHA and the petitioners recognise that there are issues with the weighting of saddles, which means the weight of the jockey is not natural.

Philip Davies: I am grateful to the hon. Gentleman for distancing himself from the description of the BHA as “blue-blooded”, which, as I said, I do not recognise.

The BHA puts animal welfare at the heart of everything it does. Anyone who has read its business plan for 2017 to 2019 will know that the first of its six strategic objectives is “equine welfare leadership”. I do not think anyone can doubt the BHA’s commitment to animal welfare. It has already started a huge animal welfare programme led by David Sykes, the BHA director of equine welfare.

I am sure my hon. Friend the Member for Tewkesbury is, like me, a regular reader of the Racing Post. I am sure the hon. Member for St Helens North (Conor McGinn) is, too. He is a fantastic joint chairman of the all-party racing and bloodstock industries group. I am merely a vice-chairman, but I am proud of that none the less. I have to say that the two joint chairmen do a fantastic job. Anyone who has read the Racing Post recently will know about the BHA’s interesting initiative with Exeter University. They have been looking at how horses’ vision affects how they see and respond to their environment. They have looked at the visibility of fences and at what colours make horses more careful when they jump them. As a consequence, a trial will soon be run in which a yellow band appears across the hurdles, because the evidence from Exeter University is that horses are more careful when they see the colour yellow. That was news to me, but it goes to show how the racing industry is leading the way. If you don’t do it, you will be left behind.

The hon. Member for Hartlepool talked about the breeding industry. On 1 January, the BHA introduced 30-day notification for thoroughbred foals born in Great Britain so there is greater transparency and information about the whereabouts of foals born into the racing industry.

My hon. Friend the Member for Tewkesbury made clear the number of people who are employed in the racing industry and the industry’s importance. Having owned horses—modest ones on the whole, as I said—I do not believe anyone is more passionate about the welfare of horses than owners, trainers and in particular the stable staff who look after those horses daily. Of course, from time to time, something happens to a horse that goes racing. No one disputes that that is tragic, but the people who are most upset about it are the owners and trainers, and the stable staff who look after those horses every day.

The hon. Member for Hartlepool clearly met various people and did some research before opening the debate. I genuinely commend him for that. I hope everyone present tries to take the opportunity to visit a racing stable and see how well horses are treated in those stables—how well they are pampered and how loved they are by the stable staff who look after them, the trainers who train them and the owners who own them. I often wish I was as well-pampered as a racehorse. No stone is left unturned in looking after them. They have saunas, swimming pools—you name it. They are rightly treated like kings and queens in those stables.
We should be immensely proud of how well racehorses are looked after in this country. I suspect that we compare very well with any other country anywhere in the world and I would be amazed if any other country had as proud a track record in looking after racehorses as we do. The Horserace Betting Levy Board has supported nearly 500 research projects on animal welfare since its foundation. Since 2000, the levy board and third parties have invested about £35 million of veterinary research funding.

Rightly, we are a nation of animal lovers, nobody more than me. As someone who has been closely involved in the racing industry all my life, I can look people in the eye and say that I think that the racing industry in this country is the best in the world and the one most interested in animal welfare. The BHA does a fantastic job in regulating. I am not entirely sure what an independent regulator would do that the BHA does not already do, given some of the things I have mentioned. Anyone can see that it leaves no stone unturned in trying to ensure that we have as few horse casualties as possible in the racing industry. Unfortunately, accidents happen to horses, but they happen when they are out in a field, not when they are racing. Many injuries happen when horses are just loose in the field; they do a lot of damage to themselves. It is terrible, awful and heart-breaking for everybody, but unfortunately those things happen.

We should not castigate an industry that does so much for animal welfare either because of ignorance or because people just do not like a sport or people in that sport. We should all congratulate the British Horseracing Authority on everything it does for animal welfare; without doubt, it is a world leader, and I hope that the Minister will echo that point.

It will not be surprising that I do not agree with the petition and fully support the responsible, proactive and, most importantly, already independent regulation of the British thoroughbred racing industry by the British Horseracing Authority. The current system has in fact been commended by the Environment, Food and Rural Affairs Committee in its greyhound welfare inquiry as being “recognised around the world as having implemented a high standard in equine care”.

The Committee highlighted that the racing industry demonstrates “a very positive example of self-regulation supporting high welfare standards”.

It is a great privilege to be the Member of Parliament for the Haydock Park racecourse. True Lancastrians have loved racing as far back as in 1752; there was a racecourse in Newton-le-Willows where I live. I apologise to colleagues, but I believe Haydock Park is the finest racecourse in the country, not just for the quality of the facilities and the racing it offers 32 days a year over jump and flat racing, but because of the huge economic benefits it provides to the St Helens economy, thanks to its 155,000 visitors a year. It sits right at the heart of the community and works with local organisations and schools.

My hon. Friend the Member for Hartlepool mentioned that the petitioners were critical of the Weatherby family and the Jockey Club. I am very proud of our chairman Lord Daresbury, his wife Claire and our association with the Weatherby family. For years, they have given incredible service to horse-racing in this country, in good days and bad days. We are very lucky to have Pete as our chairman. He works with an incredible team at the Jockey Club in the north-west. I had the opportunity recently to join one of the superb educational days offered to a local school by the industry’s Racing to School charity programme. It was incredible to see the fascination of the schoolkids and how racing was used as an educational tool. They got to see some of the fantastic thoroughbreds looking fit, healthy and immaculate in the summer sunshine in St Helens over the summer.

Although I may be a touch biased towards Haydock Park, as co-chair of the all-party parliamentary racing and bloodstock industries group, alongside the hon. Member for Tewkesbury (Mr Robertson), I am a strong supporter of the wider horse-racing industry, as are many parliamentary colleagues. The industry is worth £3.5 billion to the British economy; it supports tens of thousands of jobs and is enjoyed by millions more watching at home on TV screens. British bloodstock is at the forefront of international horse-racing; that was demonstrated just last weekend by the phenomenal back-to-back victories of Enable in the prix de l’Arc de Triomphe. Our horsemen have an international reputation for excellence. It is an industry that I, this House and the country should be hugely proud of.

I am afraid that some of the assertions we heard in the debate need to be tackled head-on, although I praise the thoughtful contribution made by my hon. Friend the Member for York Central (Rachael Maskell), based on her experience of her local racecourse. People often say that horses that are not good enough are simply disposed of or sent to the glue factory, but that is simply not the case. The industry has in place a dedicated charity, Retraining of Racehorses, which rehomes or
retrains thousands of horses each year for other equine disciplines. Further work is being undertaken to enhance the industry’s capabilities.

People also say that racehorses are shot when they are injured because owners do not want to pay for their care. The only reason a horse will be euthanised on a racecourse when injured is that it is in the interest of their welfare. That process will be carried out by a fully qualified veterinarian, using medication to prevent any suffering. I know from working closely with the Racehorse Owners Association that an owner’s only interest is in their horse’s welfare, rather than financial gain, in those sad and rare circumstances, or in any circumstances. From the strong, independent and effective regulation by the British Horseracing Authority across racecourses, trainers, jockeys, owners, breeders and grooms, to fans of the sport, the British racing industry cares deeply about the welfare of these beautiful and wonderful animals. It is important that the industry does all it can to communicate that exceptional care to the wider public. I know that that is a priority of the industry.

I pay tribute to the work being done, from the Racecourse Association, the Jockey Club, the Arena Racing Company and 30 independent courses, to the Horsermen’s Group, the Racehorse Owners Association, the Thoroughbred Breeders Association, the Professional Jockeys’ Association, the National Trainers Federation and the National Association of Racing Staff. People are working day in, day out, in the interests of the horse and to promote British horse-racing, as are the wider racing community, such as Racing Welfare, Racing Together and Great British Racing, because racing is one big family. Like all families, we occasionally fall out, but we are loyal to each of our component parts. Our love for our great sport and the welfare of the horse trumps all other concerns.

I will deal with the petition’s substantive point, but the House should be clear that the ultimate aim of its organisers is the abolition of the British thoroughbred racing industry. The call from some who signed the petition for an independent regulator may be well-meaning, but the organisation behind it wants to get rid of British horse-racing. I cannot think of any step that would do more to jeopardise the welfare of more than 14,000 thoroughbreds in training or breeding right now—or indeed the breed’s very future—than to abolish the British racing industry.

The RSPCA and World Horse Welfare have spoken of a horse crisis facing the country, with several thousand horses at risk. I emphasise that that does not include the thoroughbred breed; such a step would greatly exacerbate that. All that comes before the hugely damaging economic impact there would be on the British rural economy.

To take the petition at face value, it calls for responsibility for regulation on equine welfare to be removed from the British Horseracing Authority and transferred to an independent body. I reject that on three separate grounds. First, the British Horseracing Authority’s track record in the eleven years since it was founded is one of clear improvement in equine welfare outcomes throughout the sport. Equine fatality and injury rates are down significantly, with fatalities down to 0.18% in 2017 from an already low 0.22% in 2013. A detailed review of the Grand National course at Aintree has resulted in six consecutive runnings of that race without an equine fatality. New rules governing the use of the air-cushioned whip have reduced the threshold for offences by half and breaches are down by 40%. Equine welfare is at the heart of British racing.

As the hon. Member for Shipley said, under the direction of the BHA’s first director of equine health and welfare, the authority has already introduced measures on notification of foal births within 30 days to improve traceability. The BHA is also introducing innovations in hurdle and fence design, working collaboratively with the RSPCA to reduce faller rates, and it is undertaking a benchmarking project with the University of Bristol to understand better what is in the interests of a horse’s welfare.

Secondly, the BHA already demonstrates its independence from commercial interests through its regulatory function. Its board significantly exceeds the Sport England sports governance code criteria for independence, and it has an ambition, which I fully endorse, to increase independence further. A fully independent judicial panel holds participants and racecourses to account for rule breaches relating to equine welfare. If commercial interests were paramount, why would that panel choose to ban the champion flat jockey—unfairly, in my humble opinion—for a significant period for minor whip offences in five races out of 837 mounts, which did not compromise horse welfare at all? Why would that ban run through the sport’s richest annual race day—British Champions Day, at Ascot this Saturday—where he is to be presented with his trophy but cannot ride? The regulation of horse welfare is paramount for the BHA—the regulator and its panels.

Thirdly, the very concept as proposed by the petitioner of somehow extricating regulation of equine welfare from all of the other rules and regulations in place is deeply flawed. Every rule and regulation in British racing, enforced by the BHA’s stewarding, course inspectorate, stable inspection and veterinary teams has the welfare of the thoroughbred racehorse at its heart. The proposal is therefore as impractical as it is unnecessary.

I commend the BHA’s work in improving equine welfare outcomes in British racing. It has demonstrated a clear track record of upholding and enhancing the welfare of thoroughbred horses. The House should support British racing in its clear ambition to improve those standards further, with the BHA as a strong, already independent regulator of an industry that cares deeply for the welfare of its horses. I have every confidence in Nick Rust and his team to deliver on their ambition for British thoroughbred racehorses.

I encourage hon. Members to go and see for themselves the standards in place and enjoy a fantastic day’s racing at any of the 1,500 fixtures run annually in this country. A new independent welfare regulator in horse-racing is unnecessary and unjustified, because it is already clear that in British racing the horse comes first.
[Chris Williamson]

number of horses that have died in horse-racing. They are keen for the House to press the Government to introduce an independent regulatory body.

I joined the League Against Cruel Sports back in 1976, so I have paid some attention to cruel sports, and some elements of horse-racing are undoubtedly incredibly cruel. I have paid much attention to the Grand National. The League Against Cruel Sports, along with a number of other organisations, has made representations about the cruelty associated with that event for many years. The course has been modified somewhat, but it is incredibly gruelling nevertheless. Other hon. Members have made glowing references to the British Horseracing Authority, but in my opinion it has proved itself to be singularly useless on animal welfare since it was founded in 2007. Why do I say that? Since that time 2,000 horses have died in horse-racing. On the barbaric use of the whip, in the order of 500 abuses are recorded every year, and there is no sign of a reduction in that number.

The hon. Member for Shipley (Philip Davies) suggested rather absurdly that the whip does not hurt. He said, “Get a whip and hit yourself with it—it won’t hurt.” Let me put a challenge to him: give me the whip, go stand somewhere and let me hit you with it and see if I can hurt you. He will probably find that I could hurt him.

Philip Davies: The hon. Gentleman has a reputation for spouting off without having the first idea what he is talking about, and he has demonstrated that again. He has clearly never come across the new design of the whip in horse-racing—the whip is cushioned. I appreciate that he never feels the need to know anything about a subject before telling us all about it, but I advise him to try to find something out. He should visit racing stables and see for himself the new design of the whip, because it is cushioned and it does not hurt. Old whips may well have had problems, but the new, latest whip does not. He should know that.

Chris Williamson: Many people would beg to differ. The challenge still stands to see whether I could hurt the hon. Gentleman. Perhaps we can get some witnesses together and see whether that is possible—but perhaps he is tougher than me.

The hon. Gentleman also asserted that he is an animal lover. That is an interesting observation from someone whom I understand is in favour of repealing the Hunting Act 2004. Someone in favour of ripping wild animals to pieces claims to be an animal lover—that brings his assertion into question.

Philip Davies: To emphasise the point that the hon. Gentleman comes here without knowing anything of what he is talking about, I have made it abundantly clear that I do not support changing the law on hunting at all. The law should stay in place. Again, he makes the case for me that he comes here spouting off about things of which he knows nothing.

Chris Williamson: I am delighted to hear that, because organisations have sought to find out how Members of Parliament would vote on a repeal of the Hunting Act and the hon. Gentleman was down as being in favour. However, we digress, because we are not here to talk about blood sports.

A self-governing body in any area leaves a lot to be desired. We see it in a host of things, from financial regulation to the governing of the horse-racing industry. The British Horseracing Authority has a range of different responsibilities, including race planning; disciplinary procedures; protecting the integrity of the sport; licensing and registering racing participants; setting and enforcing standards of medical care for jockeys and other participants; setting and enforcing common standards for British racecourses; research and improvements in equine science and welfare; regulating point-to-point racing in the UK; the compilation of the fixture list; and setting and enforcing the rules and orders of racing. There is only one reference to welfare, and that is in the context of research and improvements in equine science and welfare.

To be frank, I do not understand why any hon. Member would have a difficulty with an independent body having oversight of welfare in the industry. If a body is dedicated exclusively at looking at the welfare of horses, surely that would make it more accountable and better at the job. The BHA’s responsibilities include a host of things, which I have just listed, and welfare receives just a minor reference. Having an organisation dedicated to enforcing and improving welfare standards would improve the welfare of horses.

My hon. Friend the Member for St Helens North (Conor McGinn) tried to widen the debate and question the motives of the organisation behind the petition. He suggested that it wanted to abolish horse-racing, but that is not what we are debating today. All we are debating is whether an independent body should oversee the welfare of horses that participate in horse-racing. Why would anybody have a problem with that?

Mr Robertson: I certainly do not have a problem with a body overseeing this issue. However, the BHA can suspend a jockey for overuse of the whip—which is not only disciplining jockeys but the welfare of the horse—and it is also responsible for the integrity of the sport. Does not the hon. Gentleman think that those functions fit rather nicely with welfare issues? A new body would take away those functions from the BHA and isolate the issue, when the fact is that other issues also come into play. Does he understand that point?

Chris Williamson: I take the point to an extent, but having an independent body would not mean that the BHA would then have no interest in or responsibility for welfare. An independent body would make sure that the BHA did its job properly and it would also have an overarching responsibility to prevent the same number of horses being killed or dying during horseraces. There have been 2,000 deaths since the BHA was founded and there does not seem to be any sign that the barbaric use of the whip is diminishing, notwithstanding the view of the hon. Member for Shipley that it is all lovely when a horse is hit with a cushioned whip and it does not hurt. The case for an independent body is unanswerable, in my opinion and that of many thousands of British people, whom we represent. Many hundreds of my constituents feel strongly about the issue, to the point that a number of them have lobbied me about it.

In conclusion, an independent body dedicated to stopping the tide of death and abuse in the horse-racing industry, is—
Phil Davies: Will the hon. Member give way?

Chris Williamson: I have only a few more words to say, but go on.

Phil Davies: The hon. Gentleman has been very generous in giving way, but he seems to dodge the issue by saying that we are not talking today about a ban. Does he want to ban horse-racing? Does he want to ban national hunt racing in this country? Would that be the end product if he were running the show?

Chris Williamson: No, I am not calling for that at all. What I want to see is welfare standards upheld in the industry. I would hope that all of us wish to see that. There is a difference of opinion: some seem to think that the BHA is capable of doing that, but it has proven itself incapable of doing so, because if it were, we would have not seen so many horses being killed and we would not see the grotesque use of the whip. In a sense, however, that is irrelevant, irrespective of my views. That is not what we are debating today and I am not calling for it.

I am a vegan and, indeed, the vegans will inherit the earth—there is no doubt about that. We have to reduce the amount of meat we are eating because we are killing the planet, but we are not getting into that now. We are not having a wide debate about the rights, wrongs and wherefores of various different topics. The hon. Gentleman and others have sought to muddy the waters by questioning the motives of the people behind the petition.

Conor McGinn: I do not question for a minute the right and entitlement of anyone to say that horse-racing should be banned. My hon. Friend and other Opposition Members have a long track record of campaigning and speaking out on these issues, and while I admire that, I just do not agree with it. It is important to say that, although ostensibly this debate is about moving to an independent regulator, the ultimate aim of those behind the petition is to ban horse-racing. I do not agree with that, but it is an entirely legitimate view and we should at least be up front about the motivation behind trying to disaggregate the component parts of racing, which is to end racing altogether. I do not doubt my hon. Friend’s motives or his sincerity.

Chris Williamson: I appreciate that, but I do not necessarily see the logical, sequential steps that my hon. Friend has outlined. If we agree that there is a need for an independent body, that does not inexorably lead to the abolition of racing. In many ways I think it would preserve it, because the concerns of the many thousands of people who were spurred on to sign the petition would be dissipated if they could see a body that was effective in reducing the number of horses killed and in reducing—or, indeed, eliminating—the use of the whip. Why would people call for the abolition of horse-racing, if they were that way minded, if the cruelty associated with it were eliminated? Contrary to what my hon. Friend has suggested, eliminating the cruelty would help to preserve the longevity of horse-racing.

My last few words are that the time is long overdue for an independent body of the kind called for by the petitioners.

Dr Lisa Cameron (East Kilbride, Strathaven and Lesmahagow) (SNP): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Mr Wilson, and to speak in this important debate. I thank the hon. Member for Hartlepool (Mike Hill) for speaking on behalf of the Petitions Committee.

The petition had 105,000 signatures, showing the great concern of members of the public for horse welfare across the United Kingdom. They want the debate to reflect their concerns. We want the very best animal welfare standards and to be leaders in this important field—that goes to the core of what we are speaking about. The petition demonstrates that there is great public interest in this area. Some people who signed it may wish for an abolition of racing, but at the core and the heart of many people’s reason for signing is a wish to see welfare standards improved, to make sure that we have the best possible standards for horses.

I am not against horse-racing. I have been down to Hamilton racecourse, next to my constituency, and to the Ayr Gold Cup. I have met jockeys and trainers, and spoken to the industry. I believe that we must put welfare at the heart of what we are doing. It is important that we have a balanced debate that covers what we are doing properly and where things can improve. We need to make sure that regulations can improve and that the issues raised by the public and those concerned about animal welfare are placed at the centre of the debate.

Conor McGinn: I agree with everything that the hon. Lady has said thus far. The British Horseracing Authority has equine welfare as its No. 1 strategic objective. How much higher on the list would she like to see it before she accepts that it is at the heart of what it does?

Dr Cameron: On the welfare point, does the hon. Lady agree that although, as my hon. Friend the Member for St Helens North (Conor McGinn) said, welfare might be at the heart of things and a top priority for the BHA, it is not very good at maintaining welfare if 2,000 horses have been killed and the whip is used as much as ever?
Dr Cameron: I agree with much of what the hon. Gentleman says. I understand that the whip is no longer used in Norway, including when our jockeys and horses race there, so it is not a necessary tool, regardless of any disagreement about whether it is sore to be whipped with a horsewhip or whether the whip may be cushioned, as other hon. Members have suggested. Horse-riding could continue without the use of the whip and, if there is any dubiety about the level of cruelty in using it, the Norwegian example is surely a step forward.

I thank the charities that have been involved in the petition and in working towards good standards in horse welfare. It is important that we give not only our views but those of our constituents. Hundreds of my constituents have grave concerns, and many of them emailed me to ask me to speak today and raise concerns about horse welfare with the Minister. I thank all hon. Members who spoke, as well. There was some divergence of opinion, but that is good for debate and for moving forward. It brought out many of the issues that the Minister will grapple with. I know he will do a good job of summarising and responding to the debate. The BHA actively promotes horse-racing in Britain, but it is also responsible for the welfare of racehorses. To my mind that creates a conflict of interest. That is important. Any industry where the regulator was also the promoter would have to recognise some conflict of interest. When that is pointed out, the response should be to try to improve welfare and to counteract the arguments by addressing the concerns.

As we have heard, about 200 horses are killed as a result of racing in Britain every year, and an undisclosed number die in training for races. I was concerned to hear during the debate about the horse deaths at Perth racecourse. I shall follow that up with the racecourse industry. I ask the Minister to look at the matter; perhaps he would also speak with industry representatives about the Grand National and whether more can be done to ensure that horse welfare is at the heart of racing and the Grand National in particular. The public would, I am sure, be behind him if he were to do so.

I mentioned that jockeys in Norway do not use the whip; suffice it to say that it is not necessary, and not using it would not mean the end of the industry. Another issue raised in the debate was the fact that the BHA does not apply limits to thoroughbred foal production, and that that can lead to what is called industry wastage, involving huge numbers of horses. The BHA must address that issue if we are to have faith in it to carry out its current role. It was mentioned that race day governing stewards are also frequently found to fail to report accurately on racehorse injuries. I think there have been many occasions when stewards did not report on racehorse deaths. There is a need for more transparency, through independent reporting and disaggregation of figures. I do not see that as something that would put the industry at risk, if there were nothing behind the figures to cause the public alarm. Statistics would mean we could look at the issues and at which types of racecourse and races were causing them, and consider how to improve welfare standards and address the issues fully for horses and jockeys.

The case for an independent racehorse welfare regulator is that an independent body of professionals would be accountable to the Government, and would be responsible for scrutinising all aspects of racehorse welfare. It would implement measures to help to resolve welfare issues in three key areas, breeding, racing and training—and in post-career provision, as has been described. The new body would be responsible for scrutinising individual racecourses and racing conditions alongside the race calendar programming. It would be able to place requirements on racecourses and the BHA to make tangible changes to reduce the rate of injuries and deaths, which otherwise will surely continue. The rate of injuries and deaths must come down. The BHA has had a long time to achieve that. It has made some progress—but is it sufficient? The fact that 105,000 people have signed the petition to Parliament that we are debating today suggests that it has not been living up to the standards of public expectation. It must do so—or what else can Parliament do but support an independent regulator? The onus is on the BHA to continue to do more.

Conor McGinn: The hon. Lady is generous in giving way, and I do not want to test your patience, Mr Sharma. She is right that 100,000 people signed the petition. They went online, submitted their details and clicked the button. Does she think that the 6 million people who get in their cars or on the train and go to a racecourse and take part in horse-racing every year care about horse-racing welfare too? Should their voice be heard, vis-à-vis the 100,000 people who signed the petition?

Dr Cameron: Absolutely—I totally agree. As I said, I am one of those people who would go in their car to see the races, and have a day of enjoyment there; but at the very core of that, I want to make sure, and to know in my heart, that the best possible standards are being applied at that racecourse. I do not believe for a moment that the hon. Gentleman is suggesting that there are 100,000 people who care about animal welfare and 6 million other people, who go to races and care differently; those are the same people, who care about both. They care about animal welfare, and many also go to the races.

Conor McGinn: The point I was making was that 6 million people go racing every year and 5.9 million of the people who go racing did not sign the petition, so they clearly think that racing and welfare are being adequately looked after and regulated by the BHA.

Dr Cameron: I disagree with the premise that if someone does not sign a petition, they think that something suffices. If the hon. Gentleman were to organise for the BHA to start a petition to say that people were entirely satisfied, we would see how many signatures that collects; that would answer the question.

I will finish by asking a few questions of the Minister. First, will he speak to the industry about the Grand National and what more can be done there? Public opinion is firmly behind change. Secondly, will he consider looking, with the BHA in the first instance and perhaps over time, depending on how it responds, at the transparency of the figures produced and what more we can do in that regard? Thirdly, will he be kind enough to look at the examples in other countries, such as Norway, where the whip is not used any more but where it has no undermining effect on the industry, and see whether improvements can be made there?
I think that everyone who has spoken spoke of the need for horse welfare to be the crux of the debate. I think everybody for taking part and would be very much obliged if the Minister would address the important issues that the petitioners and I have raised.

6.11 pm

Luke Pollard (Plymouth, Sutton and Devonport) (Lab/Con): I congratulate my hon. Friend the Member for Hartlepool (Mike Hill) on introducing this debate so well, and thank all hon. Members on both sides for their passionate discussion. This issue spans not only my brief, in the shadow Department for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs team, but that of the shadow Sports Minister, my hon. Friend the Member for Tooting (Dr Allin-Khan), who I thank for her input, as this is not only a welfare issue but an issue for the Department for Digital, Culture, Media and Sport.

Plymouth, which I represent, has many fantastic things, but it does not have a racecourse. It is 27 miles to Newton Abbot, or a little further on to see a race at Exeter. However, that does not mean that the issues are not pertinent to the people I represent, as has been shown by the sheer depth and breadth of numbers of signatories on this petition.

It is important to mention from the outset what an important contribution horse-racing makes to the UK economy and to local economies across the country, providing jobs as well as entertaining punters. Horse-racing estimates that it employs 85,000 people around Great Britain and measures its contribution to the economy at over £3 billion. No one doubts its contribution, but the welfare of horses needs to be an important part of that contribution if it is to continue supporting those economies.

While horse-racing is an extremely dangerous sport for horses and their riders, according to Horse & Hound—which I admit might not be at the top of every Labour MP’s reading list—around one in 17 jump jockey rides ends in a fall. Many jockeys suffer life-changing injuries and mental health problems as a result, as they compete for prize money in a hotly contested sport. As was mentioned earlier, however, while being a jockey is a voluntary occupation, being a racehorse is not.

As Peter Singer put it in the 1975 book, “Animal Liberation: A New Ethics for Our Treatment of Animals”, animals do not have a voice to speak up for themselves, so I firmly believe that as parliamentarians we have a duty to give them that voice. Today, this House has spoken: every horse matters. In their welfare, their health, their conditions and their life from birth to death—before racing, during racing and once their racing days are over—every horse should matter. If every horse matters, as we have heard today, then we need robust and constantly improving equine welfare regulation to ensure that that happens.

We will shortly hear from the Minister about the Government’s position, but when this petition reached 10,000 signatures back in March, the Government responded by saying that they did not consider it necessary to establish a new welfare body, as “overall racehorse welfare is improving and fatalities at racecourses are falling.”

Both those statements are true; my question is, how ambitious are we in wanting to see those improvements? I appreciate that DEFRA is a busy Department, but we must not be casual or cautious when it comes to animal welfare. We must be bold, ambitious and demanding. I think the Minister will have heard that from both sides in this debate.

The Government response at that time also pointed out:

“Racehorses, like all domestic and captive animals, are afforded protection under the Animal Welfare Act 2006. Under this legislation, it is an offence to cause any unnecessary suffering to an animal or for an owner, or keeper, to fail to provide for its welfare needs.”

That is right, and I am pleased that the Government have accepted the argument that sentences for those who fail to provide for the welfare of their animal should increase. Will the Minister say when he expects that to come online and when we can expect our courts to be able to use those sentencing powers in cases of poor animal welfare in horse-racing and elsewhere?

It is clear that the Government wholeheartedly back the British Horseracing Authority, but the crux of the debate is whether the BHA is conflicted in its mission between its support for the industry and animal welfare. I agree with hon. Members from across the House that the BHA needs to be an independent regulator, not just a body that sets the rules. horse-racing and elsewhere?

This goes to the heart of what the BHA is there for. In its briefing paper it stated:

“Thoroughbreds are the centre of our sport, they are its very heart and soul.”

It is right. To its credit, the BHA does not hide from concerns raised about this sector. I met with its team earlier to go line by line through many of the concerns raised, and it is clear that the BHA understands the acute challenges ahead for the industry and what it needs to do to put it right. The BHA has been around since 2007 and was brought in by the Labour Government of the time. The Select Committee on Environment, Food and Rural Affairs stated in 2016 that the BHA “is recognised around the world as having implemented a high standard in equine care.”

Key to that is the BHA’s role in improving animal welfare and equine care in particular. That is where we need to ask ourselves at what pace this improvement is happening and whether it could go faster. Although we have seen improvements in the number of deaths, down from 0.3% to less than 0.2% of runners in 2017, the question at the heart of this debate is: where next? If we are to legitimise the BHA continuing to govern the regulatory approach, when will that figure be halved? When will we get to 0.1%—by what date? What steps will be taken to get there? What happens if we do not get there? When will the target be zero?

We have heard some great speeches today from my hon. Friends the Members for York Central (Rachael Maskell), for St Helens North (Conor McGinn) and for Derby North (Chris Williamson) and the hon. Members for Tewkesbury (Mr Robertson) and for Shipley (Philip Davies), but the purpose of today’s debate and all those contributions is to look at how we can improve equine welfare faster than we are at the moment. In a highly charged, high-pressure competitive sport, where financial gains can be made by winning or going faster, we must ask ourselves whether there is a profit motive in not ensuring the best animal welfare as part of that.
We must ensure at all times not only that equine care is the foremost of the industry’s concerns, but that it is seen to be the foremost, with the industry communicating how to do that. I am sure there is agreement across the House that animals should not suffer for our entertainment.

What separates horse-racing from banned sports such as foxhunting, cockfighting and dogfighting is that it does not include unnecessary pain or suffering to the animals used. That is the heart of the social contract on the basis of which horse-racing is permitted.

The World Horse Welfare organisation believes that “the role of horses in sport is legitimate and right, as well as mutually beneficial—so long as their welfare is put first.”

As my hon. Friend the Member for Hartlepool said, while some racehorses are treated like kings, horse-racing still causes death, pain, distress and suffering for many horses. While progress has been made on making the sport safer for horses, are we comfortable with the pace of change to date?

While the Labour party is still developing its full animal welfare position, hon. Members will know that we have consulted on our 50-point animal welfare plan, “Animal Welfare For The Many, Not The Few”. During the consultation period in the summer we received 5,000 responses, which is quite a lot for an Opposition consultation on this subject. At the heart of that plan was a desire to see an independent animal welfare commissioner introduced as a safeguard to ensure that all Government policy is not only compliant with animal welfare but is being enforced and that, where animal welfare is entrusted to self-regulatory bodies, that body is maintaining high animal welfare standards. That should be at the heart of this debate and goes to the heart of some of the petitioners’ concerns to ensure that animal welfare in the horse-racing sector is put front and centre and delivered.

If the BHA commits to always putting horse welfare above the interests of commercial sport, as it has done and says it does, if it can properly separate those sides of the organisation and always act to protect horses in line with the latest scientific evidence, it should have nothing to fear from enhanced scrutiny, inspection and transparency. Indeed, it has told me that it wants that, and an animal welfare commissioner would be a step towards achieving it.

The crux of the concerns of those who signed the petition and those who have spoken in the debate can be split into two broad themes. One is independence. Although the BHA has gone to great lengths to make its animal welfare bodies independent and separate, I believe it needs to do more to communicate that governance to the public and to continue to drive for those bodies’ greater independence and separation from the sector. The second theme is standards, and the demand that they should be world-class, world-leading and so ambitious that they set the UK out a furlong ahead, not edging it by a nose. I also want to see faster and further progress on the key equine welfare issues raised. The social contract that allows the use of animals in sport is changing. Consumers are more demanding, and welfare standards are rightly being pushed higher in response.

Having spent many years working for the Association of British Travel Agents, the travel trade body, I know about the power of self-regulation. However, I also know about the responsibility to ensure that, where an organisation regulates members who pay its wages, that organisation should remain one step ahead, in a leadership position, not following the pack. There can be no dash from last place to win the day in good governance or vision. Good governance and independence is not a destination but a constant journey. Standing still is not an option. The BHA should welcome this debate as an opportunity to improve not only its standards but its communication.

I suspect that the Minister will argue that the BHA is the right body to oversee equine welfare. If so, what ambitious and stretching targets does he have for the sector? How can the deaths of 0.2% of runners be halved in the next five years? If they cannot, what will the public response be? I believe in self-regulation, but it has to work and has to carry consumer confidence to remain relevant. As we have heard, there is still a challenge with self-regulation in the sector, and more needs to be done for it to continue. That is why I want the BHA to publish ambitious plans to further reduce horse-racing deaths, to set out how new technologies will help to support better behaviour, and to review the use of the whip. Many sound voices in the racing industry want change in that regard.

When our animal welfare plan was put out for consultation, we received countless responses on the use of the whip in racing, as my hon. Friend the Member for York Central mentioned. The BHA has taken steps to reduce the use of the whip, limiting it to seven strikes in a flat race and eight in a national hunt, or jump, race. However, we need to look again at whether that is right.

I mentioned the changing social contract between those who participate in the sport, those who watch the sport and, importantly, those who bet on horse-racing. The use of the whip is one element of the social contract that has recently changed and that will continue to change. I know that there are voices within the industry that would like the use of the whip to be further reduced, if not outlawed, except in cases of safety. There is a strong argument in support of that.

The RSPCA believes that the only whips permissible should be those of proven shock-absorbing designs. I must admit that I think replacing whips in horse-racing with MPs whipping each other may soon become more fashionable, given the exchange that we heard earlier. However, it is important that whips are used with minimal force and on minimal occasions, and only for genuine safety purposes. If everyone in horse-racing stopped using whips, the horse that wins a race would be the one that is best trained, has the most energy and is most focused. The best jockeys with the best tactics would win the race, not necessarily those who strike the most with their whip. That has been happening in Norway since 1982, and British and Irish jockeys adhere to those rules when riding there.

The social contract is changing. We need to look at it and in particular at the number of deaths. At the moment, the deaths of 0.2% of runners is too high, equating to roughly one in 500 racehorses. The only reason that it is accepted is because they are horses. Were they humans, that level of fatality in a sport would not be accepted. We have to ask whether, if we applied the same standards to animal welfare as we do to human welfare, as is increasingly the case in animal welfare policy, we would accept the same number of deaths in cricketers or rugby players.
Labour demands that the industry comes up with more stringent and ambitious targets. I want the BHA to bring together its frequently good work, which we have heard about during this debate, into a more ambitious plan.

Mr Robertson: I agree very much with the hon. Gentleman. Is his conclusion that a separate, independent body is not necessarily the way forward, and that bolstering the BHA and perhaps making it more accountable is probably the best way forward?

Luke Pollard: At the moment, there is a strong case for reform and greater ambition. A self-regulatory system needs to carry the confidence of the public. I think that the BHA has heard the concerns voiced by Members on both sides of the House, including those who support its role, in wanting a more demanding and ambitious set of policies. We need to look at what will happen if that is not put in place. Organisations that do not keep pace with changing consumer demands on animal welfare and the changing social contract will see their business model effectively erode from the bottom up, as we have seen with SeaWorld in the tourism sector. If there continue to be more deaths, there is a real danger that the industry’s legitimacy could be threatened, as mentioned by Members on both sides of this debate.

Much more needs to be done on improving animal welfare. We should be clear that British horse-racing is a national success story, but we want the industry to work harder, faster and smarter to improve equine welfare and to set transparent targets that can be independently verified. The public have a right to know if activities only pay lip service to that or are genuine—ambitious plans or simply pedestrian. The industry has a lot of good stories to tell about animal welfare and safety, but it can also do a lot more to improve them.

If Labour was in government and I were in the Minister’s place, I would be demanding a greater set of targets from the industry, looking at how we can halve the deaths of horses involved in horse-racing. When will we reach the 0.1% target, and can it be a numerical target, not just a percentage target? As we heard from my hon. Friend the Member for York Central, Brexit could have an impact on the number of runners for races, so we want to make sure that we are not simply hitting a percentage target but talking about the number horses that die in the trade.

There is an awful lot of good news from the sector. However, there are an awful lot of improvements that Members on both sides should rightly demand if the industry is to continue to adapt and flex to meet the changing social contract and changing consumer demands that our electorate are making.

6.27 pm

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs (David Rutley): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Mr Sharma. I congratulate the hon. Member for Hartlepool (Mike Hill) on speaking up for the petitioners, which he did extraordinarily well, while also adding in some of his own views along the way. It has been a useful and stimulating debate.

I am the newly appointed Minister for Animal Welfare, and hon. Members on both sides of the House can be assured that this issue is very important to me. Like other Members, I have also received several emails from constituents who have signed the petition; there were 176 from Macclesfield. It is clear from the contributions made that racehorses spend many weeks training hard to compete in races so that many people across the country can enjoy the thrill of horse-racing, which, as set out by my hon. Friend the Member for Tewkesbury (Mr Robertson), the right hon. Member for Warley (John Spellar), and others, is the second-best-attended sport after football. That is why we should rightly expect that racehorses are looked after to the highest standard and that their welfare needs, as required by the Animal Welfare Act 2006, are met.

The BHA is responsible for the safety of the tracks, for both horses and jockeys. I am pleased that it works hard to put in place the necessary safety measures for horses and works collaboratively with welfare experts from the RSPCA and World Horse Welfare to continuously improve its work in this vital endeavour, which is important.

As the new Minister, I wanted to understand what these welfare organisations—as well as my colleagues—had to say, so I read with interest the views of the RSPCA, which is supportive of its working arrangement with the BHA. The charity’s deputy chief executive, Chris Wainwright, said:

“We work really closely with the BHA and we think that relationship has resulted in lots of really good improvements, whether it’s the use of the whip”—

we will come on to that again in a moment—

“hurdles design or the review of Aintree.”

It is clearly open to further reviews, but it has a positive working relationship with the BHA.

World Horse Welfare says that it has worked constructively with the BHA for many years, which has resulted in a number of positive changes to further advance racehorse safety and welfare.

The BHA has a dedicated team who inspect the 60 racetracks in Great Britain. There are four inspectors of courses, who have an allocated number of racecourses. I will not go into all the detail of their work, but it is clear that they do preliminary inspections of the racecourses; they are involved at the start of every season. Throughout the season, racecourses continue to be monitored, and then any improvements that are required get acted on. On race day itself, as the hon. Member for York Central (Rachael Maskell) has seen for herself, a huge amount of activity goes on to ensure that there are high standards then as well.

How do we think that the BHA is performing? There were differing views across the Chamber today. The BHA maintains statistics on the number of horses involved in fatal accidents, and it is really important to see the level of fatalities and the trend. Mention has been made of this, but let me put it on the record for clarity: clearly, each fatality is absolutely tragic. The continuing decline in fatalities from the years 2012 and 2013, when there were 211 and 196 fatalities respectively, to 167 in 2017 is encouraging, but I am keen to see the number of fatalities decline still further. From contributions in today’s debate, including a very useful contribution from the shadow Minister, the hon. Member for Plymouth, Sutton and Devonport (Luke Pollard), I think that that ambition is shared across the House. The BHA needs to recognise that and respond to it, and I will come in due course to how I think it could be recognised.
As has been highlighted, there is always a degree of risk in any sport or activity, whether to the humans or animals involved. With 91,000 runners at tracks in 2017, the fatalities represented 0.18% of all runners. It is positive to see the percentage also declining since 2012. That is very welcome, given the work that the BHA is doing to put in place the necessary safety measures. I have to state again that that is done on a collaborative basis with the RSPCA and World Horse Welfare. That approach is vital. I accept the point made by the hon. Member for East Kilbride (Dr Cameron) that more needs to be done to ensure that the figures are transparent and available to the public more readily. I will raise that when I meet the BHA.

A good example of a result of the collaboration between the BHA and the RSPCA is the redesign of fences and other aspects of the Grand National course, as the hon. Member for St Helens North (Conor McGinn) will appreciate, given his constituency interests. It resulted in the inner frames of fences being replaced with more forgiving flexible plastic. That has led to a sharp decline in the number of fatalities in that iconic race; indeed, there has been none since the work was completed in 2013. That is good news, and more needs to be done to learn from these important lessons to reduce fatalities further in other races.

There have been very notable contributions to the debate. Some were incredibly supportive of the status quo, although I think that everyone wants further change and improvement. Worth highlighting are the intervention early on from the right hon. Member for Warley and the contributions from the hon. Member for St Helens North and my hon. Friend the Member for Tewkesbury and for Shipley (Philip Davies). They highlighted how much horse-racing means to many people across the country and that the welfare of racehorses is vital, not just for the industry’s sake but for the horses’ sake. They are wonderful animals and their welfare should be paramount. Hon. Members spoke strongly in support of the BHA’s work, but I did not detect complacency. I recognised that they felt that racehorse welfare needed to continue to be a real priority.

We were able to see during the debate what it is like to go to York racecourse on race day. We had a behind-the-scenes view of what goes on from a contribution by the hon. Member for York Central that was characteristically thoughtful and, as always, as I have noticed in these debates, well researched. She raised a number of issues and, with the permission of hon. Members present, I will take on board the points that he made. We are all saying here, although from different positions, that a carrot can be more effective than a stick, but we will not go too far down that track.

None the less, important issues have been raised about use of the whip. In this country, strict rules are in place. Stewards are empowered to hold inquiries and to ban jockeys. The BHA rightly keeps those rules under review, and of course lessons should be learned from places such as Norway. It was interesting to read the report produced by the RSPCA for this debate. It has obviously been monitoring use of the whip and working closely with the BHA on this issue. According to its report and review, between 2012 and 2015 there was a 40% reduction in use of the whip. The RSPCA welcomes that, as I think we all do, but we would probably all say, “Let’s go further down that track.”

On the subject of retired racehorses, it sounds as though New Beginnings, in the constituency of the hon. Member for York Central, is doing great work and it is to be commended. We need to learn from the positive work that is going on to retrain racehorses, which was also highlighted by the hon. Member for St Helens North. Indeed, £750,000 is being made available to see what can be done to facilitate the rehoming and retraining of racehorses. I am really encouraged to note that there are successful second careers for racehorses.

The hon. Member for York Central talked about a number of EU-exit-related issues, including that of skilled staff. The Migration Advisory Committee has been asked to review the shortage occupation list, and I am sure that the racing industry will want to make its contributions to that important review. She highlighted equine movement; that is one of several issues that need to be considered as we look at leaving the EU. The continued movement of equines between the UK and the EU, with the minimum of delay, is very important to the industry on both sides. It is therefore in both sides’ interest to ensure that that is maintained. Technical notices were put out on 12 October about what arrangements will be put in place in a no deal scenario, but obviously what we are working towards—we have heard more about it today—is securing a deal. The negotiation, as we are all too aware, is ongoing.

The hon. Member for Derby North (Chris Williamson) took a different track with his view of the BHA’s track record. None the less, it stimulated a lively debate. Even he did not want a ban on horse-racing. I think that what we are all saying here, although from different positions, is that we want to see the welfare of racehorses put centre stage. I will take on board the points that he made.

The hon. Member for East Kilbride and several other communities—I can never remember them in order, so I will stick with just East Kilbride—made, characteristically, such a reasonable contribution that it is hard to disagree with many of the things that she said. Further improvements are required. She felt that there was a conflict of interest with regard to the BHA’s role. I do not particularly share that view, but I will go into that in more detail. She did set out some issues to tackle, notwithstanding the figures that we have talked about for the Grand National, and she talked about what can be done to address issues in relation to the whip.

The hon. Member for Plymouth, Sutton and Devonport, who also made an important contribution, highlighted the Animal Welfare Act 2006, which was put into place under a previous Government, under his party’s leadership. That is a very important Act. I, too, welcome the fact that...
the present Government are looking to increase the sentences. We are looking to bring that into place as soon as possible when parliamentary time permits. We are seeking the Bill necessary to make it possible, and I know that he would welcome that moving forward as quickly as possible. He also highlighted the fact that this subject is very much about an ongoing journey. I share his ambition; in fact, I want to go further. As the Minister for this area now, I need to press hard on these issues.

I will now wind up and give a few concluding remarks. I would like to stress again that we must do all that we can to reduce the fatalities of horses while racing on a track. I am grateful for all the contributions in this debate, which show the keen interest that is genuinely felt in the welfare of racehorses.

The Government welcome all the work the BHA has done, and continues to do, for the safety of horses and riders and as a functioning and transparent body, which has the key responsibility in this area. With the work the BHA has done to further reduce the number of fatalities at racetracks, the Government do not see a need to take a different approach by creating a new body, as was set out in the initial response to the e-petition. That does not mean that the BHA should not continue to be held to account. It should continue to have to explain what it does in an open and transparent way, as has been set out clearly in this debate.

I am looking forward to meeting the BHA in the near future. The welfare of racehorses will be at the top of the agenda and will continue to be at subsequent meetings. I am particularly interested to discuss with the BHA its review, which is due to be published soon, of the tragic deaths of six racehorses at Cheltenham. I think that will be an important vehicle to understand its commitment and ambition, which—as has been set out clearly in the debate—other hon. Members share. It provides an opportunity to look at what more can be done at the Grand National. Let us use that report as a moment for reflection. I hope that the BHA is listening to this debate.

Mike Hill: My understanding from the research I have done is that the count at Cheltenham was six horses on the racecourse and one off of the racecourse and that the seventh horse has now been included in the overall count.

David Rutley: I thank the hon. Gentleman for that clarification. I will seek clarification myself, based on what he said. Whether six or seven, it is a tragic number of horses to have died in one event. That review is important and timely, particularly for me as a new Minister. I look forward to that meeting, which will be testing and challenging, quite rightly, because of what has been set out in this debate.

I will also continue to monitor the reports of future fatalities and review associated action plans, to ensure that further progress is made in the months and years ahead. As previously stated, I am pleased that the BHA has an open and fruitful relationship with the key welfare bodies in this area—the RSPCA and World Horse Welfare—and that it takes advice on animal welfare from those organisations. I am sure that that will continue; it should be encouraged.

While the Government may not agree with those who signed the e-petition on the need for a new body, I hope that we can all agree that more can and should be done to work collaboratively, to keep the spotlight on reducing fatalities and improving the welfare of racehorses. I look forward to playing my part in this important work.

Mike Hill: I thank all hon. Members for their contributions. I thank the e-petitioners and Animal Aid, representatives of which are here, for bringing this e-petition. I thank the Authority, which is also represented here, for meeting me. Finally, I thank the Petitions Committee support team for its programme of online engagement on the subject in the run-up to this debate.

Question put and agreed to.

Resolved, That this House has considered e-petition 211950 relating to setting up a new independent body for the protection of racehorses.

Sitting adjourned.
Westminster Hall

Tuesday 16 October 2018

SIR ROGER GALE in the Chair

Eating Disorders

9.30 am

Wera Hobhouse (Bath) (LD): I beg to move, that this House has considered reducing stigma around eating disorders.

It is an honour to serve under your chairmanship, Sir Roger.

We probably all know at least one sufferer or ex-sufferer of an eating disorder. As one put it to me, eating disorders are the easiest thing to get into and the hardest to get out of. We have come a long way in recent years, but we are nowhere near to providing lasting, successful treatments for hundreds of thousands of people. Many people are suffering alone and in silence, without a support network. We are failing as a society to support people in their deeply personal battles.

This debate is about stigma. There are two stigmas around eating disorders—that from outside and that to support people in their deeply personal battles.

Wera Hobhouse: I totally agree. There are a number of people in the Public Gallery today who have spoken out. I will come on to how important it is that people have the confidence and feel secure enough to speak out.

It takes an average of 58 weeks from someone realising that they have a problem to seeking help from a GP. That is more than a year of self-doubt, self-loathing and self-harm. On average, it is a further 27 weeks until the start of treatment. Add to that the time that the person has suffered with a disorder before admitting that there is a problem and we start to see the real picture.

Melanie Onn (Great Grimsby) (Lab): In my constituency, there is an excellent facility, Rharian Fields, run by Navigo, a social enterprise. It is rated as outstanding by the Care Quality Commission, but only accepts patients over the age of 17. If we are to tackle some of the deep-rooted psychological issues, does the hon. Lady agree that we need facilities for young people under the age of 17? Such facilities are incredibly difficult to access around the country.

Wera Hobhouse: I thank the hon. Lady for that contribution. We do not really understand eating disorders deeply enough and we need to start a lot earlier. We need facilities for people younger than 17; we need to get into the issue at a much earlier age. It is all about understanding what the problem really is. We are a long way from properly understanding the deep-rooted causes. The more treatment available and the earlier we can intervene, the better.

Tim Farron (Westmorland and Lonsdale) (LD): I congratulate my hon. Friend on securing this important debate. Early intervention is hugely significant. Many eating disorders can be prevented from developing to their full extent with proper preventive care. Is she aware that the Government enable public health bodies in Cumbria to spend only 75p per head for children in the county on preventive treatment? Does she agree that that is a disgrace and that we ought instead to be investing in, for instance, having a mental health worker attached to every single school, to ensure that we prevent people getting to the later stage?

Wera Hobhouse: Across the board, and particularly when it comes to public health, prevention is so much better than picking up the pieces afterwards. We can save so much money if we do something early rather than only intervening when somebody is already in crisis. That is particularly true for mental health, and the challenge here is that eating disorders are still not very well understood.

John Howell (Henley) (Con): I have a personal interest in this subject. A close member of my family suffered from bulimia. What we found most important was the support provided by the family network. That, above anything else that could be provided, was what carried the family member through to a positive conclusion.

Wera Hobhouse: Anybody who has had a close family member in such a situation will understand the hon. Gentleman’s point, but families are often pretty helpless too, if they do not really understand what can be done and how they can help their family member to get out of the problem. It is a form of addiction, and like with any other addiction, family members are co-sufferers. They want to help but do not really understand the deep-seated problems. Family members are important, but we need the professionals and their understanding to help families get through together. The hon. Gentleman is absolutely right that families are incredibly important.

Eating disorders define large periods of people’s lives. How can we shorten that time? We need people to be okay with saying, “I’m not okay.” We need to tackle the stigma around eating disorders, and the message needs to get through to a lot of people. More than 1 million people in the UK have an eating disorder; three quarters are women and one quarter are men. That is a very large number, plus there are the friends and family who suffer with them. So many people with conditions such as anorexia and bulimia blame themselves. It is not their fault and we need to make sure that they know that.

When I announced on Twitter that I was holding this debate, I received a wave of emotional responses and personal stories. Yesterday, a local doctor dropped into my office a book that she had written, which described her fight with eating disorders since the age of 13. That shows how early it can start.
I also got an email from a young woman called Lorna, who experienced serious anorexia while studying in my constituency in Bath. This is what she told me:

“I ended up with an initial diagnosis of anxiety and depression, and was started on antidepressants. I suspended my studies and worked as a carer in my local village, living at home with my mum and brother. People I’d known all my life began commenting on the weight I’d lost, and telling me how good I looked. This is when my anorexia began to take full hold.

I stopped eating completely, lying to my mum and saying I’d eaten at work, began over-exercising compulsively, and then telling the people that I was healthy. I told him I was petrified of putting on weight, exercising excessively and skipping nearly every meal. His response was ‘Oh, that’ll be your antidepressants.’ He took me off a high dose, there and then. Cold turkey.

Each time...I told him how out of control I felt with my eating. He’d force me onto the scales, shaking and crying, and then tell me my BMI was ‘healthy’ and I didn’t meet the diagnostic criteria. I was devastated. I had opened up and was denied help. I never got diagnosed with anorexia, despite going from a size 16 to a size 8 in less than a year.

I went through the monthly humiliation of being dragged onto scales and told I wasn’t thin enough to be helped yet. And not having that formal diagnosis is hard. When I tell people I was anorexic, they never quite believe me, as even doctors didn’t. I think they always assume I was being dramatic, or ‘it wasn’t that bad then’. Today, I am weight-restored, although struggle with the weight I’d lost, and telling me how good I looked. This is the story. We need to use them and the figures that prove they exist in Cumbria, and people who present with eating disorders often go through the struggles that she has just talked about, because the people that they see are not specialists.

Wera Hobhouse: I fully agree with the right hon. Gentleman: the services are too patchy, which is why families do not really know what to do. We need to ensure that there is not a postcode lottery—I will come to that later—and that services follow on from each other and are much more holistic and integrated. There is none for adult services. On average, adults wait twice as long as people under the age of 18. The Government must do everything to remove barriers to treatment. In particular, young adults are incredibly vulnerable. At our autumn conference, the Lib Dems called for the Government to ensure that all young people can access young people’s mental health services up to the age of 25, because from the age of 18 many young adults move out of home, go into further education or start their first job, all of which can be stressful when they no longer have support from home. We need to introduce waiting times for adults to ensure that they receive help as quickly as possible.

The Minister is likely to mention that in 2015 the Government allocated £30 million of extra resources per year for five years to improve the NHS treatment of eating disorders for teenagers. However, in some cases that is not reaching the frontline, because the funding is not ring-fenced and can be diverted to other priorities.

Tim Farron: Leading on from that point, my hon. Friend will be aware that in 2016 the Government pledged money for a specific one-to-one eating disorder service for children and young people under the age of 18. Yet two and a half years on, that service does not exist in Cumbria, and people who present with eating disorders often go through the struggles that she has just talked about, because the people that they see are not specialists.

Wera Hobhouse: I fully agree with that. The lack of proper training is really at the heart of what my hon. Friend describes.

Mr George Howarth (Knowsley) (Lab): I congratulate the hon. Lady on giving us the opportunity to discuss this very serious issue. Does she agree that, in addition to dealing with the problems that are thrown up by having an eating disorder, the difficulty for people in that position and for their families is access to proper services? That varies from place to place, town to town and city to city. Does she believe that we need a more integrated service that is the same everywhere and that provides an effective service for young people—and older people, for that matter—who are in that situation?
Research conducted by Dr Agnes Ayton in June 2018 shows that, on average, “medical students receive less than two hours of teaching on eating disorders” throughout the entirety of their undergraduate training. Some 20% of medical schools do not include eating disorders in their curriculum at all. Of the medical schools that do include eating disorders in their curriculum, 50% do not include in eating disorders in their examination.

In the end, it comes down to the priority that we and the medical profession place on mental health and its treatment. Making mental health a priority and giving it parity with physical health is more than a slogan; it requires understanding and some new thinking. If somebody breaks their arm, we do not sit around for a year and then put on a cast; we treat the broken arm immediately. We need to act quickly to treat eating disorders and mental health in general. If we wait too long, these illnesses can become severe and entrenched—they can last for many years and often have a massively debilitating effect on sufferers and their families. The earlier the intervention, the more likely it is that sufferers will make a full recovery.

In Bath, we have a not-for-profit social enterprise called Brighter Futures, which is funded by child and adolescent mental health services and which provides special services for children and young people. The 30-plus practitioners do an amazing job, but their funding has been cut in half. Such services are perfect opportunities for early intervention to treat eating disorders, but if they are not properly funded, young people will slip through the cracks. Charities are now trying to fill the gap. The Somerset and Wessex Eating Disorders Association is one such charity—the only charity between Cornwall and Norfolk that works in this field. It is based in Shepton Mallet and sees clients from a wide area: from Somerset to Bath, Bristol and Swindon. People self-refer to the service; they do not need a diagnosis. The association is very much pro-recovery and self-help.

There are people all over the country who do not have any access to such services. There should not be a difference in the level of service that people receive, depending on where they live—we cannot leave this to a postcode lottery. Clearly, we need to do better. It is obvious that services are patchy at best, and that people have to travel much too far for treatment and wait too long to be treated. Others really need help but fall under the threshold for treatment.

It is not just the Government who should act to tackle eating disorders. The focus of this debate is stigma and how we can reduce it. Each and every one of us can help. Eating disorders are widespread, but they continue to be kept secret by so many sufferers, who fear being judged negatively by others. They see themselves as defective and as not meeting societal standards. They feel disgust and self-loathing about their appearance, eating or purging habits, or they worry that disclosure will result in their difficulties being trivialised. The stigma is perpetuated by general ignorance of what eating disorders are. The first step to challenging stigma is providing better education—it is not only our future doctors and health professionals who need to be better trained, but the general public. A successful strategy to reduce prejudice is for people to come forward and tell their stories. Such stories break the silence and the shame. That is why we so desperately need people such as Lorna and Hope, who are brave enough to come forward. I thank them for being here and telling their stories. Together, we can end the stigma.

9.50 am

**Kirstene Hair (Angus) (Con):** It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Sir Roger. No one who has been directly affected by any form of eating disorder, or who has been around a relation, colleague or friend who has battled such a disease, will be in any doubt about the devastation that such conditions can bring to a person’s life. Sufferers of eating disorders have the highest mortality rate of people with mental health conditions. About 1.25 million people in the United Kingdom suffer from eating disorders, so I feel strongly that this issue has to be addressed head-on: with strong actions, rather than warm words. Although eating disorders can affect anyone, it would be inappropriate not at least to acknowledge, in an era that emphasises having a positive body image, that the National Institute for Health and Care Excellence estimates that about 90% of people with eating disorders are female.

I welcome the £1.4 billion that the Government have committed to tackle mental health and eating disorders over the next five years, which comes on top of the £150 million they committed in 2014. Although funding is important, having a treatment strategy is even more so. We cannot just throw money at the issue and hope it makes the improvements we need. Hope is not a strategy.

The Government have made important commitments, such as the target to ensure that, by 2020, 95% of those referred with an eating disorder will begin treatment within one month—within one week for cases diagnosed as urgent. We cannot underestimate the benefit of early treatment; to tackle this issue, we must emphasise the need for it. It is reassuring that the Government clearly recognise that. I want to ensure that anyone with an eating disorder who needs help receives it fast.

Someone close to me visited her doctor because she was having distressing thoughts about ending her life. Her eating disorder had taken over and gone so far that she believed it to be irreversible. She cried in the doctor’s surgery about the pain it caused her and everyone around her. She was offered antidepressants. I welcome Beat’s recommendation to the Scottish Government that GPs need to be informed of the early symptoms so that they are able to refer without delay. We are far too quick to offer patients prescriptions, rather than give them the help they actually need to overcome this deep-rooted issue.

It is incredibly troubling that the picture is so different north of the border in Scotland, compared with England. The Scottish National party-led Government have failed to deal with the problem with the same urgency. Let me make it clear that I am not here to score political points; I am here to address the gaping hole that I, my constituents and many pressure groups see in Scotland, and I want to use this opportunity to put more pressure on the Scottish Government to right that wrong. Although England’s population is 10 times that of Scotland, it has only four times as many hospital admissions for eating disorders. Although that may partly be down to differences in how such admissions are recorded, we cannot ignore the possibility that eating disorders are simply more frequent north of the border due to cultural or dietary differences.
Although the increase in eating disorders is a UK-wide phenomenon, in Scotland the number has increased by two-thirds since 2005, compared with just 44% in England. Despite the apparent prevalence of eating disorders in Scotland, the Scottish Government are failing to act. Most worryingly, and with no reasoning behind it, Scotland has no specific waiting time targets for people diagnosed with eating disorders. Such patients are subject to the same 18-week target as patients with any other mental health condition. That timeframe is simply not good enough, and shows a complete failure to understand how urgently this illness needs to be treated. Eighteen weeks—126 days—is not acceptable; it could be the difference between life and death.

I wrote to the Scottish Government earlier this year to press them on this matter and to see whether they had any plans to introduce waiting time targets in line with those that the UK Government have outlined. Their response confirmed exactly what I thought: disappointingly, although not surprisingly, they have no such plans. Various groups have submitted freedom of information requests to the Scottish Government to get a true image of the position, but due to the lack of a national framework, the data has not been collated consistently. Why would the Government not implement a system that allows that information to be readily available to ensure easier data collection so solutions can be found? People with this debilitating disease expect more from their Government. I support the work of Beat and other charities that are doing great work of raising awareness within health services so that they can give the correct diagnoses earlier for these patients.

I return to my anecdote about the doctor’s surgery to talk briefly to training. Recent research shows that teaching and training in Scotland is, to put it politely, falling short. Four excellent universities in Scotland—Aberdeen, Glasgow, Edinburgh and Dundee—were asked how much time on average is dedicated to eating disorder training during their four-year medical degree. They answered in hours: Aberdeen, three; Dundee, three; Edinburgh, four; and Glasgow, four. They were asked whether eating disorders were covered in the final submissions. It is covered in one question in Dundee and none in the other three. I am not a doctor, but I know that that is not enough.

When a patient with an eating disorder or a similar issue presents themselves, our specialists must have the tools to be alerted to their problem. We know that people with eating disorders have the innate ability to make out nothing to do with food—I know that, because I have knowledge of them, so I want to comment on them.

An estimated 360 adults and 90 children are referred to specialist community eating disorder services each year in Northern Ireland. Those truly monumental and horrendous figures indicate the health problem. The figures for the past five years have increased by 92%, which indicates that we need to focus on this issue through the Department of Health and Social Care. I look to the Minister to make a suitable response that will give us heart.

We can make progress on this issue only if we have an approach that recognises that eating disorder diagnosis requires urgent action, resulting in specialist treatment. The Scottish Government must stop burying their head in the sand and give this issue the dedicated attention it needs. We need to help those affected to get out of the position they find themselves in so they can begin to rebuild their lives and the lives of those around them.
“Absolutely pathetic. It’s no reflection on anybody who works there, they try their best, but she was discharged on her 16th birthday. She was no better, she was just above the age for their service. She was still too young, though, for the adult service and had nowhere to go.”

That is one of the problems: moving from child to adult services. My examples will illustrate that very clearly.

David Simpson (Upper Bann) (DUP): I am sorry that I came late to this debate. Does my hon. Friend agree that when we talk about early intervention, we are talking about young people? Schools and social media have a responsibility, as they can be such cruel places for young people who feel that they are not perfect and are forced down the route of eating disorders. More needs to be done in that regard.

Jim Shannon: I thank my hon. Friend for his intervention. He is absolutely right: social media have a lot to answer for in many respects, but especially on this issue.

In the Belfast Telegraph article, Mrs Bridges went on to say:

“We just had to deal with it at home. We felt there was only a focus on her physical health, there was absolutely no psychological service.”

We need early diagnoses to ensure that we can deal with the physical—yes—but also the psychological, because that is such a key factor. Sophie spent the first half of 2017 as a hospital patient in a mental health unit. Mrs Bridges said:

“They did their best, but the provision just isn’t there. There are just so many different issues in one unit. There are girls like Sophie in the same ward as elderly people with dementia and others with schizophrenia.”

We can see right away where the problems are. Those problems are not unique to Northern Ireland, but are replicated across the United Kingdom. It is clear that we are letting down people who need help and attention that could make a life-saving difference. That was just one example of a young girl who very tragically lost her life, and our thoughts are with her family—her parents, in particular.

Another example is that of one of my other constituents, whose mum and dad I knew quite well. They were both councillors and a Member of the Assembly, long before I came to this place in 2010. Their daughter, whose name I will not mention, had anorexia that was so extreme, as I was telling my hon. Friend the Member for East Londonderry (Mr Campbell), that I spoke to Edwin Poots, the then Northern Ireland Minister for Health, and explained the case to him.

We do not have the self-referrals that the hon. Member for Angus (Kirstene Hair) referred to; patients have to be referred by the Department of Health. I asked Edwin to look at the case because the young girl was very close to death. He referred her to St Thomas’ Hospital, just across Westminster bridge, where they were able to help her; I met her and her parents in the House back in 2010 or 2011. The fact of the matter is that the treatment she got—let us give the NHS some credit for its work—saved her life and turned her around. She is now married and has two children. For her, her parents and her family, that is good news.

Despite our best efforts at addressing nutrition in classrooms and through soaps and other TV programmes, the Eating Disorders Association NI said that the eating disorders most commonly seen in young people under 18 are becoming more common among children between the ages of eight and 14. Let us not underestimate just how early eating disorders can start and how that affects people; the hon. Member for Bath mentioned that in her introduction. Eating disorders in children are becoming more common within that age group, and research shows that boys are at as high a risk as girls. I will share some of the figures on that in a moment.

The society that we live in fixates on skinny living, which is a misguided approach to healthy living. At one stage, I weighed almost 18 stone and risked developing diabetes. I turned the situation around by reducing my weight, which I will hopefully keep down. I did that and stopped once my goal had been achieved. What about people who cannot stop?

Comments in programmes such as “Keeping Up with the Kardashians”—I do not watch it and could not say who any of the Kardashians are or where they are from, but my parliamentary aide does watch it, much to her horror, though, at the point in the series when they diagnosed her with anorexia—I do not watch it and could not say who any of the Kardashians are or where they are from, but my parliamentary aide does watch it, much to her horror, though, at the point in the series when they diagnosed her with anorexia—fixate on looking skinny; in one clip, being called “anorexic” is even a compliment. That must be addressed.

In fairness, the apology from the Kardashians is wonderful, and they should be commended for realising that their comments came across in an unhealthy way, but the words cannot be withdrawn: young women who want to be more like the Kardashians, who seem to have it all, have already been impacted. I am not saying that we should have censorship, but we must have the common sense to address and not worsen our eating disorder problems. My hon. Friend the Member for Upper Bann (David Simpson) referred to social media, which have a lot to answer for. They set trends and create peer pressure. Sometimes, I wonder whether some of society’s problems—not all, but some—are caused by social media.

Many of us have referred to raising awareness, and the health service ombudsman has also recommended measures to increase awareness of eating disorders among healthcare staff, who have to know what the tell-tale signs are to support early diagnosis. Maybe the Minister can give us an indication of what he can do on that.

I look at my own beautiful granddaughters and sincerely believe that they are perfect. The thought of their view of themselves being shaped by others is frightening. They are young girls—only nine and four—but for some eight-year-olds, eating disorders have already taken hold, so let us address the issue at the earliest opportunity. We must take steps to ensure that the difference between skinny and healthy is taught from a young age.

I have some figures here that indicate the magnitude of eating disorders. Some 725,000 people in the UK are affected. At the time I found the figures, 90% of those affected were female, but the latest figures indicate that 25% of those affected are male. While it is very much an issue for young girls—they make up the cases I am aware of in my constituency—we also have to recognise that there are young men out there with the same problems. Young men are becoming as likely as young women to suffer from an eating disorder, and we must ensure that the message is sent that this is not a teenage girls’ disorder. It affects men and women, old and young, rich and poor. The disorder is life-threatening and we must do more to address it. We must provide more help to beat it and keep beating it every day of sufferers’ lives.
10.8 am

Matt Warman (Boston and Skegness) (Con): I thank you, Sir Roger, and congratulate the hon. Member for Bath (Wera Hobhouse) on securing this important debate. She began, rightly, by saying that eating disorders are so much more than stigma. It is right that we focus on treatment, because eating disorders—as all of us in the room know—are conditions that are often dismissed initially as girls trying to look like celebrities. They often end with a third of sufferers recovering, but a third of sufferers live with the condition for the rest of their lives and a third do not make it at all. Those figures are truly shocking and would be shocking for any condition, whether mental or physical.

The stigma arising from eating disorders is not solely about looking slim. It is about the pervasive effect of that eating disorder. It is a condition that quickly stops people being able to function in the way that they would wish to function. It is a condition that stops people leaving the house. People end up being stigmatised because they are not behaving as they would like to, not able to fulfil a function within society and, often, not even able to work or go out. The stigma arises because of the condition, and it is the condition on which, clearly, we should focus.

I commend the work that charities such as Beat have done to raise awareness of eating disorders and to ensure that people are not stigmatised; that GPs in particular do not greet people who show up suggesting that they are worried about their attitude to food by saying that it is not a problem and that they might just allow themselves to go away and get better. We need to focus on NHS training but also to acknowledge, as my hon. Friend the Member for Angus (Kirstene Hair) did, that there has been some progress in England, if not sufficient in Scotland yet. However, this is not a party political matter.

We have seen not only some positive work by the NHS and charities, but some of the damaging effects of social media, as the hon. Member for Strangford (Jim Shannon) said. Social media presents a huge opportunity to promote the positive body image that we would all like to see of what being healthy in the 21st century looks like. In reality, at this stage on this front social media does far too much harm than good. It is far too easy to scratch the surface of the internet to find images that reinforce deeply negative perceptions of body image, reinforcing behaviours that are profoundly harmful. If social media companies can do a huge amount to take down child abuse images and other images that we as a society decide are profoundly harmful, it is reasonable to ask what more could be done automatically or more rapidly to take down images that all too often end up with people losing or taking their own life.

John Howell: My hon. Friend is making a powerful point about social media, but perhaps he needs to go one stage further, to look at the role of the advertising industry and the images that it puts forward, which encourage young people to achieve a fantasy position for themselves and their body image.

Matt Warman: I absolutely agree with my hon. Friend and, in fact, that was the point that I was coming on to make next. Clearly, not only do some sites encourage profoundly self-harming behaviour, but the advertising industry puts forward exactly that pervasive image to which he referred. We should look to regulators and Government for action to tackle that in a sensible way that promotes a genuinely healthy lifestyle without promoting unhealthy or unreasonable expectations, but we should not pretend that it is anything other than very difficult. Tackling such issues should not bleed over into not being positive about people who struggle with their weight, who would often like to see a more positive image of people who are larger. None of us wants to see an advertising regulator that ends up prescribing an ideal weight, although we need to prescribe a greater sense of health.

I agree absolutely with what the hon. Member for Bath said about no sensible and properly trained doctor in the modern NHS using BMI alone to assess whether a person has an eating disorder. However, too often it does become the single defining characteristic. Too many doctors have not been provided with all the tools and do not have the services to which they might refer their patients. Too often BMI becomes the measurement of last resort, and it is right for the NHS to seek to tackle that and for this House to do all we can to encourage the Minister and the NHS itself.

The hon. Lady mentioned family therapy. My understanding is that family therapy, in particular for young people and adolescents, is the only clinically proven therapy. It has been shown to make a real difference. It is incredibly intensive in resources and in the pressure on the family and patient, but it works. We should do more to reduce the stigma—to come back to the point of the debate—so that families accept that they might have someone in their midst who needs help not just from the NHS but from them—their family and friends.

As the hon. Lady said, however, it remains the case that eating disorders do not stop when someone is 17 or 18. In all too many cases, triggered by stress, they can emerge or return when a patient gets older. With that in mind, we should commend the work of places such as the Maudsley, which have tried to push family therapy beyond the point where everyone is expected to live at home and to say, for example, that the university setting could be a kind of family that encourages people to get better. What happens when people are older? As I said at the start of my speech, there are of course a number of functioning older adults who need all the help with which we can provide them, and that is about more than antidepressants.

If the Government could do two things, the first would be to encourage social media companies to look more closely at what can be done to tackle those images that go beyond the kind of advertising that my hon. Friend the Member for Henley (John Howell) said we need to look at and go way into a territory that is not healthy for anyone. My second ask, when it comes to funding research and spending some of that £1.4 billion that we are allocating to eating disorders over the coming years, is for the extension of family therapy—the one method that we know works. With the help of science and innovation, we should be looking at whether we can go further with that therapy. The stigma around the condition is a hugely important issue, but we must focus on tackling the illness itself.
Eating disorders are serious and potentially life-threatening conditions. Unless proper support and more mental health funding are made available to tackle them, we will all pay the price.

A person’s BMI should not prevent them from getting the support that they need. Action is also needed to tackle irresponsible social media companies, which give platforms to those who glorify eating disorders and negative body images. Failure to tackle eating disorders costs lives and results in heartbreak, anguish and despair for people with such disorders and for their families. It ends up costing the NHS more, because of the increased need when someone hits crisis. Much more funding is needed for mental health services, including child and adolescent mental health services. More early intervention is needed to address eating disorders.

In The Guardian in October last year, Dave Chawner described his experiences as a boy with an eating disorder. He wrote:

“Before I was anorexic I’d always assumed people with mental illness knew they weren’t well. But on reflection that’s ridiculous. My Dad has diabetes. He had it for years before anyone realised and no one expected him to innately know. Sometimes you’re too close to your own life to gain perspective; it’s like trying to make sense of a painting if you’re only inches from it.

It’s really hard to find the words to describe my anorexia—it was more of a feeling, a lacking, an awareness I wasn’t really coping...I wanted to talk but I didn’t know what to say. I was waiting for something to happen so I could classify myself as ill. I was worried people wouldn’t take me seriously, that if I didn’t explain myself properly people would think I was attention-seeking or pathetic.”

He concluded:

“So I understand why more people don’t just talk, because sometimes finding the words can seem impossible. Not all the silence on mental illness is to do with stigma. It’s also about finding the right words.”

We have to get rid of the stigma around eating disorders to help the thousands of people like Dave who are suffering.

Thousands of people with eating disorders are turned away from treatment and support every day. The NICE guidelines for access to treatment are correct, but they are not implemented in the right way.

Rachael Maskell (York Central) (Lab/Co-op): That is a real issue with Vale of York CCG, where only 12.9% of people start treatment within four weeks. The CCG spent only £68,000 of the £161,000 it had to spend on eating disorders. Beat identified it as the worst CCG in the country. Does my hon. Friend agree that far more robust accountability is needed for the delivery of services for eating disorders?

Bambos Charalambous: My hon. Friend makes an excellent point. Yes, much more funding and accountability is needed to tackle eating disorders. I will come to that shortly.

A person’s BMI should not prevent them from getting the support that they need. Action is also needed to tackle irresponsible social media companies, which give platforms to those who glorify eating disorders and negative body images. Failure to tackle eating disorders costs lives and results in heartbreak, anguish and despair for people with such disorders and for their families. It ends up costing the NHS more, because of the increased need when someone hits crisis. Much more funding is needed for mental health services, including child and adolescent mental health services. More early intervention is needed to address eating disorders.

Eating disorders are serious and potentially life-threatening conditions. Unless proper support and more mental health funding are made available to tackle them, we will all pay the price.

Chris Evans (Islwyn) (Lab/Co-op): I congratulate the hon. Member for Bath (Wera Hobhouse) on bringing this vital debate to the House. I pay tribute to everyone who is watching the debate, whether they are in the House or at home. I know that eating disorders—bulimia nervosa, anorexia nervosa, body dysmorphia and others—
are secretive and private illnesses that people battle, and that it is difficult for those individuals to speak out because of their fear of being judged.

Many Members touched on the immense pressure that people are under to look thin, healthy or muscular. When I was a teenager, my big role models were Arnold Schwarzenegger and Sylvester Stallone. Every time their films came out, I wanted to look like them. It got to the point where I worked out twice a day. I lifted weights constantly and followed a diet. I suffered from all the causes of body dysmorphia. I never looked good enough. But wanting to look like big Arnie was not the trigger; the trigger was that my parents were going through a divorce and I was about to sit my exams. It was a high-stress situation, and the only way out of it was to look like Schwarzenegger or Stallone. Luckily—or unluckily—I injured my arms and could not lift weights any more, and that feeling went away. But for so many people, it does not go away.

On my way to the Chamber, I went to the newsagent and looked at the magazines. This week’s Men’s Health says, “Lose belly fat in 30 days.” GQ has pictures of people with six-packs. Gary Barlow, who is promoting a new book, said, “I was so unhappy when I was 17 stone, but look at me now—I’m 12 stone. I lost 5 stone.” People are under immense pressure. Mark Wahlberg, who led the band Marky Mark and has starred in various films, said recently that his daily regime begins with him getting up at half-past 2 in the morning and working out twice before half-past 7, when he plays golf and goes off to work. Nobody in the media condemned him—everyone complimented him on his discipline. That is madness.

What message are we sending to young people—that it is good to look like someone from “Love Island”? When I am on the beach in Porthcawl, no one looks like they are on “Love Island”. This weekend, my wife and I decided to clear out some old books. Most of them were by Atkins or had titles like 30 Days to a New You or Body for Life—“12 weeks to your new body!” There was even one about the Dukan diet. All those diets sell a perfect way of life. If someone suffers from self-esteem issues and thinks they are not good enough, like I did many years ago, those books feed into that. It is not just social media that we have to come down on.

Let me say this about social media. I read in the paper that a young girl who got through to the final of a competition said she had been plagued by trolls about her size. As someone said earlier, if we force social media to take down illegal things, we should do the same with trolls. The Government could go further with the diet industry. The Advertising Standards Authority needs real teeth so that when it sees those things happen, it can come down on magazines and advertisers like a ton of bricks. Equally, we have introduced health warnings for things such as cigarettes and alcohol, and we should do exactly the same for eating disorders.

Eating disorders manifest themselves in different ways. For me, it was body dysmorphia and my constant desire to train. Other people experience other things. When I was about 19 or 20, I met a young woman who lived at the top of our street. My mother, who said that the woman had anorexia, befriended her. That young woman said that every morning, she would wake up and eat a quarter of a red pepper. My mother asked why, and she said, “Because when that comes up, I know I’m empty.” She could not get the help she required. She could not get a referral to a psychiatrist.

It is all very well saying that that was 30 years ago, but it still happens. The National Audit Office reported the other day that a quarter of young people, who make up most of those affected by eating disorders, cannot get an appointment with a psychiatrist. When they do, it is often not with a specialist. The picture is patchy across the country.

Let me end as I began—by paying tribute to everyone who suffers from an eating disorder. I say to them: “Talk to someone. Seek out the help you need. It does not have to be from a professional—it just has to be from someone you trust. If you come forward, you will find that people do not judge you but try to help you if they can.”

10.29 am

Dr Lisa Cameron (East Kilbride, Strathaven and Lesmahagow) (SNP): It is an absolute pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Sir Roger, in an extremely important debate that reaches out to those across the United Kingdom who are struggling with eating disorders, and their families. I very much commend the hon. Member for Bath (Wera Hobhouse) on bringing the debate to the House and on her extremely poignant and sensitive speech about the day-to-day issues that people living with eating disorders face and their difficulties in accessing services across the United Kingdom, and specifically in her constituency.

Let me put it on the record that I have worked as a psychologist in the NHS in Scotland, including with people who have eating disorders. I want to spend a few minutes discussing the issues I had while working with people and how services can be taken forward. First, I thank all hon. Members who have spoken; the hon. Member for Strangford (Jim Shannon) spoke consensually, as always, about the issues in Northern Ireland and how difficult it can be for people to come forward and seek treatment. I also thank the hon. Member for Angus (Kirstene Hair), who spoke about her difficulties in accessing treatment in her locality; that is a difficulty indeed, which is reflective of the service difficulties across the United Kingdom. I would like to sit down and discuss my own experience with her, if she were willing to do that.

The Scottish Government have put money into mental health services, including eating disorder services. An extra £250 million for mental health has been placed at the heart of the strategy. The Scottish Government’s mental health strategy is a long-term strategy from 2017 to 2027.

The issues raised by hon. Members about body image are extremely important. Body image has come to the fore with the advent of social media. People struggle with it, particularly young people, and I think it contributes to the difficulties that people face. It is possible that there is a greater propensity for eating disorders to develop as a result of those issues. I particularly thank the hon. Member for Islwyn (Chris Evans) for raising the issue of body image, particularly for young men, because often that is overlooked. It is extremely important and will become much more relevant as time goes on,
because social media has such an impact on people, as do advertisers. It certainly contributes to the difficulties that people experience, through the sense of perfectionism. Young men are not excluded from that—in fact, idealistic images are portrayed to young men and young women that are particularly unhealthy to psychological and physical development, particularly in relation to people’s adjustment and mental health in particular.

The hon. Member for Enfield, Southgate (Bambos Charalambous) also spoke about body image, social media and the difficulties of accessing treatment and services in his constituency. He often makes fantastic contributions and I am always pleased to be in debates alongside him. The hon. Member for Boston and Skegness (Matt Warman) made an extremely well-informed speech, about some of the difficulties in coming forward and GP training, primary care and people’s pathway through services. I thank everyone who has taken part in the debate.

The Royal College of Psychiatrists in Scotland produced a briefing paper that states that “Scotland has seen striking improvements in the provision of specialist eating disorder services over the past decade. They include specialist units in Aberdeen and West Lothian, and beds in Glasgow. It continues: “Services have been developed to provide alternatives to hospital admission, or shorter admissions.”

There are anorexia intensive treatment services in Lothian and Fife, day programmes in Aberdeen and specialist teams in Glasgow. On training, the 2010 Eating Disorders Education and Training Scotland programme was set up to bring training to professionals across Scotland and to train experts in practice. But despite all those issues and progress made, there is still so much more to be done.

From my own experience, I agree with the majority of Members who have spoken that services remain quite patchy. There is still a postcode lottery across the United Kingdom. I do not set Scotland out as different or having different difficulties in that regard, but Governments across the United Kingdom are trying to grapple with and make progress with these issues. It would be helpful if the Minister could address service provision in rural areas, what might that look like and how people could access services. I know that having to travel long distances to services can be a particular difficulty for patients when they come forward, and that is not always helpful for family involvement, yet we have heard that therapy and family involvement can be extremely important for the prognosis.

On CAMHS, it is an objective of the Scottish Government to put counselling services in every school. From the work I have been doing on the Health Committee, I know that the UK Government are also looking at those issues. However, it is difficult because when young people have an eating disorder it perhaps does not initially present as that—it might present as depression, anxiety or another symptom. Often the eating disorder is not acknowledged by the person suffering from it or does not come to the attention of those around them for some time later.

Those who work with young people should have appropriate training to look below the surface for the symptoms of eating disorders, which might present in different ways in young people, so that people do not fall through the net so often. It can be difficult, and misdiagnosis in the initial stages is quite common, because one of the symptoms is denial. Perhaps the person does not want to seek treatment, or they present themselves in a way that suggests that they have a different mental health difficulty. Perhaps their family wish them to seek treatment but they are resistant. Those are all the issues that services have to grapple with. Therefore, the care pathway must be improved.

Denial is extremely important. Hon. Members spoke about early intervention, but it is extremely difficult to intervene early when often people do not accept their own difficulties and do not wish to come forward for treatment. Often, we look for other types of difficulties at presentations in primary care at GP level. GP training will have to be extremely sensitive and more hours will have to be devoted to understanding the different ways eating disorders present.

One of the difficulties I experienced was referring from primary care to specialist eating disorder services. The person had to go through three services to get where they needed to be. By that point, we are talking months down the line because only a community mental health team can refer to the eating disorder service. I suggest that that is not necessary, because psychologists and psychiatrists working in primary care are perfectly capable of diagnosing eating difficulties and referring straight on to specialist services. That should be addressed.

Weight restrictions are a particular issue for those with bulimia. If a service uses weight restrictions and makes body mass index a key criterion, those with bulimia will fall through the net. My quick ask of the Minister is for services to be more flexible and accept referrals to specialist services from those in primary care; for specialist training for a member in every CAMHS team to pick up eating disorders in young people; to have a discussion with advertisers about the contribution to mental health of unrealistic body image expectations; and to pick up the issue of rural services.

10.40 am

Paula Sherriff (Dewsbury) (Lab): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Sir Roger. Like others, I thank the hon. Member for Bath (Wera Hobhouse) for securing this important debate and for speaking so passionately.

As we have heard from many colleagues, eating disorders manifest in many different ways. They are mental illnesses that involve disordered eating behaviour, with types including anorexia, binge eating disorder, bulimia, purging disorder and avoidant or restrictive food intake disorder—that list is clearly not exhaustive. Their severity and complexity should never be underestimated. Sufferers will commonly go to extreme lengths to hide their symptoms and behaviours even from those closest to them.

It is thought that the majority of people with eating disorders are young women aged 12 to 20, but it is harmful to stereotype; the possibility that someone can develop such a disorder should never be ruled out. The number of boys and young men developing them is rising, and the numbers could be higher than we think, mainly due to stigmatisation and fear of speaking out. Indeed, when I visited the Navigo eating disorder service, which my hon. Friend the Member for Great Grimsby
In December 2017, the Parliamentary and Health Service Ombudsman published its findings after investigating the death of 19-year-old Averil Hart from anorexia. Its investigation “Ignoring the alarms: How NHS eating disorder services are failing patients” found that there had been inadequate co-ordination and planning of Averil’s care and that, tragically, Averil’s death could have been prevented had the NHS provided appropriate care and treatment.

The Parliamentary and Health Service Ombudsman and Beat, which I also thank—does fabulous work and lobbies Members of Parliament to ensure that this issue is firmly on the agenda—have recommended that the General Medical Council conduct a review of training for all junior doctors on eating disorders to improve understanding of complex mental illnesses. As we have heard, although eating disorders affect an estimated 1.25 million people in the UK, training on it is limited to just a few hours over several years of training.

GPs, who are often the first port of call for people with eating disorders, must be provided with the training they need to identify the illness and to know what steps to take next. Blame is attached not to NHS staff but to how the service is run. The problems in the NHS have not come about overnight; the Government knew they would happen. Junior doctors have protested against the situation.

Much more needs to be done to aid the early stages of diagnosing and treating eating disorders because, as with much else, early intervention is crucial. A constituent of mine who was suffering from an eating disorder was praised on her weight gain during a consultation—such comments are enough to set recovery back for months. Health professionals should be given training on acceptable basic language when dealing with these sensitive issues. I am interested to explore family therapy further, because when I have met sufferers of eating disorders and their families, its great impact on the whole family has been clear. Family therapy is therefore a positive way forward.

I am conscious that I am running short of time, so I will try to summarise the remainder of my speech. NICE guidance for eating disorders states that children and young people with suspected eating disorders should start treatment within four weeks. However, a 2017 survey by Beat found that only 14% are referred within four weeks of their first GP visit. The average wait for referral is more than 11 weeks, and those aged 19 and over wait significantly longer. The situation is worse for men and boys, who make up between 10% and 20% of people with anorexia or bulimia.

We know—it has been said before—that mental health services are the poor relation in a cash-starved NHS. Some 40% of NHS mental health trusts are having their budgets cut, and we appear to be moving further and further away from parity of esteem. When I recently questioned the Under-Secretary of State for Health and Social Care, the hon. Member for Thurrock (Jackie Doyle-Price), it emerged that an average of 2,000 mental health staff are leaving their posts in the NHS every month. At the end of June this year, one in 10 mental health posts was vacant, despite promises by the then Health Secretary, the right hon. Member for South West Surrey (Mr Hunt), that he would increase the mental health workforce by 21,000.

As Labour’s shadow mental health Minister, I am passionate about seeing improvements across all our mental health services—as I know everyone in the Chamber...
is. I am committed to delivering on Labour’s promise to have a counsellor in every high school, as early intervention is the key to preventing serious mental health issues. We would also ensure that budgets for mental health services are ring-fenced and ensure parity of esteem, providing a properly funded NHS with properly funded mental health services.

10.49 am

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Housing, Communities and Local Government (Nigel Adams): I congratulate the hon. Member for Bath (Wera Hobhouse) on securing this incredibly important debate on a topic that is a key priority for the Government and for the Under-Secretary of State for Health and Social Care, my hon. Friend the Member for Thurrock (Jackie Doyle-Price), who unfortunately cannot be here; that is why I am responding to the debate.

It is clear from the testimony we have heard today that having an eating disorder can be devastating. The hon. Lady is absolutely right that people should have the correct mental health support—in the right place, at the right time and, most importantly, without the fear of stigma.

Eating disorders are serious, life-threatening conditions with the highest mortality rates of any mental health disorder. They can have severe psychological, physical and social consequences and they often start and are prevalent when people are young. We know that early intervention is absolutely vital, as noted by the hon. Member for Dewsbury (Paula Sherriff), and we recognise how important it is that everyone with an eating disorder can access quick, specialist help when necessary. That is why we set up the first waiting times, in order to improve access to eating disorder services for children and young people, so that by 2020-21 some 95% of children with an eating disorder will receive treatment within one week in urgent cases and within four weeks in routine cases.

Latest available waiting time figures for children and young people with an eating disorder indicate that NHS England is on track to meet that standard by 2020-21. First quarter data showed that 74.7% of all patients started urgent treatment within one week and over 81% of patients started routine treatment within four weeks. The number of people who are seeking treatment is rising and it is greatly encouraging to see a commensurate increase in patients getting the care they need, as well as a significant reduction in waiting times compared with last year.

However, there is further to go. Beat, the eating disorder charity referred to this morning, which does fantastic work, reports that on average it takes people over a year to seek help after first recognising the symptoms of an eating disorder. We recognise the importance of raising awareness and reducing stigma so that more people feel able to talk about their eating disorder and to seek treatment.

In January 2017, the Prime Minister committed to making mental health first aid training available to all secondary schools, aiming to have trained at least one teacher in every secondary school by 2020. In the first two years of the programme, over 2,000 school staff have received training, helping to reduce stigma in school environments. The Government have also committed to equip 1 million people to be better informed about looking after their own mental health. Public Health England is leading the development of a £15 million national mental health campaign called “Every Mind Matters”. The first pilot began earlier this month in the Midlands, ahead of a national launch next spring.

I move on to community services for children. In-patient treatment should be seen as a last resort wherever possible, which is why the Government announced in 2014 that they would invest £130 million to expand and improve eating disorder community-based care. We are making good on this promise and as a result 70 dedicated new or extended community services are now either open or in development. This has led to swift access to effective eating disorder treatment in the community, with the number of children and young people accessing treatment increasing from 5,243 in 2016-17 to 6,867 in 2017-18.

The services are designed to give young people with eating disorders and self-harm issues early access to services in their communities, provided by properly trained expert teams that deliver evidence-based psychological and medical intervention, aiming to avoid the need for hospital stays. By improving care in the community, we can improve outcomes and recovery, reduce rates of relapse or prevent eating disorders continuing into adulthood and, if admission is required as a very last resort, reduce lengths of stay.

I will now address some of the issues raised by hon. Members in the debate. The hon. Member for Bath made a series of incredibly important points, particularly about training for GPs. Early identification is crucial and it is vital that professionals look out for potential signs that indicate an eating disorder. GPs are trained to identify symptoms and help patients discuss the issues, but in response to the recommendations in the Parliamentary and Health Service Ombudsman report on the tragic death of Averil Hart, as referenced by the hon. Member for Dewsbury, Health Education England is reviewing its current education and training offer and, crucially, identifying any gaps. It is working with eating disorder experts to scope existing evidence-based practice, to inform any new education and training resources.

The hon. Member for Dewsbury was right to mention that being under weight and body mass index are not good criteria for treatment. The NICE guidance is clear: rejection for treatment on the grounds of weight and BMI is not in line with any of the published guidance and should not occur. The hon. Lady also mentioned travelling too far for treatment, as did the hon. Member for East Kilbride, Strathaven and Lesmahagow (Dr Cameron). We are committed to ensuring that everyone with an eating disorder has access to timely treatment, as close to home as possible. That is why we are seeing a shift to community services, to try to reduce, wherever possible, out-of-area placements. The hon. Lady talked about ring-fencing funding for these services. This is important too, as local areas need to fund services based on local needs. That is why I was alarmed to hear the figures from the hon. Member for York Central (Rachael Maskell). I will ensure I take this up with our local clinical commissioning group. As the hon. Member for Bath said, funding must reach the
frontline. We already have in place the 70 community services, designed to give young people with eating disorders early access to services in their communities.

My hon. Friend the Member for Angus (Kirstene Hair) talked about having the confidence to speak out. She is right and we welcome Beat’s work in helping to improve awareness. I am delighted that the hon. Member for East Kilbride, Strathaven and Lesmahagow will be meeting my hon. Friend the Member for Angus, following her powerful speech. The hon. Member for Islwyn (Chris Evans) brought up an awful case concerning a constituent. I can assure the hon. Gentleman that my officials have heard what he said and, with his permission, we will follow up and make sure the Department of Health and Social Care comes back to him about that case. The hon. Member for East Kilbride, Strathaven and Lesmahagow was correct to mention service provision in rural areas.

Several hon. Members raised the issue of social media, including my hon. Friend the Member for Boston and Skegness (Matt Warman), the hon. Member for Enfield, Southgate (Bambos Charalambous) and, not least, the hon. Member for Strangford (Jim Shannon). It would be very unwise of me to attempt to keep up with the Shannons, but I can tell the hon. Gentleman that the Government recognise the impact that social media can have on mental health. Increasing evidence is showing that excessive social media use may have a detrimental effect on young people’s mental health.

The hon. Members for East Kilbride, Strathaven and Lesmahagow and for Enfield, Southgate also raised body image, as did the hon. Member for Islwyn in his incredibly powerful and moving speech. Those promoting the perfect body image should be forced to watch this debate, to listen to the testimony we have heard and to be made to think about what they publish and the devastating impact it can have.

To conclude, I extend my thanks again to the hon. Member for Bath for securing the debate and all hon. Members here today for their powerful speeches. I am proud of the work the Government are doing to improve eating disorder services. We have a long way to go. I am also proud of the incredibly brave young people who have come here today to listen to the debate and who have been mentioned in the speeches. I hope I have been able to provide some reassurance that we are absolutely committed to reducing the stigma associated with all mental health conditions, including eating disorders.

10.59 am

Wera Hobhouse: I thank everyone who is here, particularly the amazing campaigners, including Lorna, Hope and the representatives from Beat, who do amazing work to help us all to break the silence and the shame that sufferers feel. We can do a lot as a society and social media can help.

Practical things can be done, where Government and mental health services are responsible. We have been talking—I thank the Minister for his response—about waiting times, ring-fencing of funding and proper training for doctors, but also practical things, such as dumping the scales. As he said, there are NICE guidelines, but we need to make sure that they are followed.

The statistics, including the fact that the mortality rate is the highest for any psychiatric disorder, are shocking. A third of people do not get better, and a third suffer chronic consequences. Only a third get better, while a third get worse. Those are terrible statistics for something that we know what to do about. We can do something about it, and we fail to. I see today’s debate only as a beginning; I promise everyone in the Gallery that. I also promise the Minister that I shall continue to bother him.

Motion lapsed (Standing Order No. 10(6)).
Step-free Access: Battersea Stations

11 am

Marsha De Cordova (Battersea) (Lab): I beg to move, That this House has considered step-free access at stations in Battersea.

It is a pleasure to speak under your chairmanship, Sir Roger. I speak not only as the Member representing Battersea, but also as someone with a disability, because I am a visually impaired person. My constituency is home to four railway stations. Clapham Junction, the busiest interchange station in the country, served more than 27 million journeys last year and has step-free access to all platforms. However, step-free access to trains remains a significant challenge for many disabled rail travellers; that is a point I shall come to later. The other three stations—Battersea Park, Queenstown Road and Wandsworth Town—appear to have no step-free access. In total, more than 7.5 million passengers go through their doors each year but, as the stations do not have step-free access, their doors are closed to people with mobility issues, including a great many disabled people.

Battersea Park station, which had nearly 2 million people passing through its doors last year, was chosen as a station for the Access for All 2014-19 funding cycle. Access for All is a Government programme to fund accessible infrastructure improvements at all train stations. However, that much-needed planned work was put on hold because of the Hendy review of Network Rail’s investment programme. Queenstown Road station, another busy station, which served more than 1.5 million journeys last year, is due to have a fully accessible second entrance as part of the new Battersea Park East development on the north side of the site, but there will be no step-free access to the station platforms. Wandsworth Town station, which was the 20th busiest station on the Wessex route, with 4 million journeys last year, is similarly due to have an accessible entrance at its north side as part of the Swandon Way development. Again, however, step-free access will not be provided to all platforms. That raises a question: what is the point of having an accessible step-free entrance, but no step-free access to the actual train platform? I would like the Minister to address that point. I am pleased to say, however, that two new stations currently under construction in Battersea—Nine Elms and Battersea Power Station—are expected to have step-free access.

Battersea Park station and Queenstown Road station are both in Queenstown ward, which has a higher proportion of disabled people and people with long-term health conditions than does the constituency as a whole. Yet their local train stations are not accessible to them. Clapham Junction—a station that is step-free and where more than 6 million journeys are made by disabled people each year—does not guarantee step-free transfers between train and platform, which prevents many disabled passengers from getting on and off trains independently.

Why is what I have described important? We must not underestimate the significance of barriers. Step-free access to stations can mean the difference between the ability to lead a fulfilling and flourishing life, and from the world of work. That is the reality for far too many disabled people. For example, one man said that the lack of step-free access means that “you have to consider which jobs you go for, some are just not an option. If someone offered you a promotion and you think there’s a train station around the corner but scope it out and...there’s steps then it will make the difference between going for the job or not.”

Another person spoke of feeling anxiety when having to travel by train, and being unsure whether there would be support at each station. That is also the case where there is no step-free transfer between the train and the platform, which leads to many disabled people having to rely on members of the public for assistance getting on or off a train.

There is no doubt that much more can be done to enable disabled passengers to embark on and disembark from trains independently. It will require meaningful commitment and investment. The Government must step up to that.

Afzal Khan (Manchester, Gorton) (Lab): I thank my hon. Friend for giving way and congratulate her on securing the debate. Disability access is an issue in many places. In my constituency, campaigners in Levenshulme have been calling for step-free access for a long time. We are making good progress, which is largely down to the determination of community groups and local representatives who have brought the issue to the fore. Does my hon. Friend agree that all stations in the country should have step-free access as standard, and it should not depend on how organised communities are?

Marsha De Cordova: I agree with my hon. Friend and will come on to that point, because many older people’s and disabled people’s groups campaign tirelessly and push for fully step-free access at all stations. My hon. Friend is right that that should be standard.

As well as the lack of step-free access, disabled people face numerous other barriers when they want to travel by train. They include the unreasonable requirement to book assistance in advance—that prevents spontaneous travel and removes the ability to turn up and go—and the expansion of driver-only trains. The removal of guards means that the railways become more inaccessible, and disabled people lose the assistance on trains that many of them require. That is why we must keep guards on trains.

With so many barriers placed in the way of disabled people’s independent travel, it is no surprise that a recent survey by Leonard Cheshire Disability found that more than a third of disabled people experienced problems using trains last year. That highlights the fact that we still cannot say we are a fully inclusive society. Many of those barriers exist because when stations were built, the rights and interests of disabled people were not recognised or acknowledged. It is essential for infrastructure work to be done on stations to modernise them, and for them to be built around everyone’s needs. We would all benefit, and we could truly say that we were a fully inclusive society.

Department for Transport cost-benefit analysis shows that, on a “conservative estimate”, for every £1 invested in the Access for All programme there is a £2.90 benefit to the economy as a whole. However, I am disappointed that the Government’s progress to date has been inadequate.
The Access for All programme was founded under the Labour Government in 2006, and it brought about significant benefits, including the funding of the infrastructure improvements that led to Clapham Junction being made step-free in 2011. That has helped to remove some of the barriers that prevent disabled people from travelling by train, but its progress has been too slow, with just one in five stations around the country being fully accessible.

The Conservative-led coalition Government’s Equality 2025 programme created a target for disabled people to have the same access to transportation as non-disabled people by 2025. However, in the 2015 to 2019 rail investment control period, the Government cut £47 million from the Access for All funding. That lost funding should be restored in the 2019 to 2024 rail investment period, but the Government’s commitments, as set out in their recently published inclusive transport strategy, did not appear to do that. After such significant cuts to the Access for All programme, do the Government have any hope of delivering on the transportation aim of Equality 2025?

The process for securing funding needs to be improved—that point was raised by my hon. Friend the Member for Manchester, Gorton (Afzal Khan). Access for All funding depends on applications being made to Network Rail. Rail operating companies have to compete for funding, and whether a station is allocated funding depends on the strength of the business case that is put forward. Will the Minister comment on that? Should not the starting point be to ensure that the Access for All programme is adequately funded, so that all stations that require infrastructure work can be covered? All our stations should be accessible by default, and they should all be step-free.

Will the Minister say whether there will be step-free access not just to station entrances, but to platforms? Can she guarantee that all newly built stations will be fully step-free? Given the scale of the work needed and the cuts that have been handed down, when do the Government expect disabled people to have the same access to transport as non-disabled people do? It was once hoped that that would be achieved in seven years, but is there still any hope of that? Will the Minister commit to restoring the £47 million that has been cut from Access for All, so that stations such as Queenstown Road and Wandsworth Town can be made fully step-free?

It is the Government’s responsibility to build an inclusive society, in which the barriers I have spoken about are broken down. To do that, train journeys must be accessible from end to end—that means that someone can get to the station, on to the train, off the train and out of the station at the other end. I call on the Government to put in the investment needed to build an inclusive railway, including accessible stations in Battersea. Finally, I thank those who have provided me with briefings on this important issue.

11.13 am

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Transport (Ms Nusrat Ghani): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Sir Roger, and I congratulate the hon. Member for Battersea (Marsha De Cordova) on securing this debate and giving colleagues across the House the opportunity to discuss the important subject of accessibility to the rail network as far as Manchester—that is no distance from Battersea! I recognise how important it is for the hon. Lady’s constituents to have access to the railway and to get to and from work, see family and friends, and go about their lives.

Delivering a transport system that is truly accessible to all is of great importance to me, and I hope that the hon. Lady has seen the Department for Transport’s inclusive transport strategy, published in July, as evidence of the Government’s commitment to taking action to safeguard and promote the rights of all disabled passengers. We do not deny that our strategy is ambitious, but we are determined to deliver it. By 2030 we want disabled people to have the same access to transport as everyone else, and if physical infrastructure remains a barrier, assistance will play a role in guaranteeing those rights. Key commitments to improving accessibility across all modes of transport for those with visible and less visible disabilities include up to £300 million to extend the Access for All programme until at least 2024.

Marsha De Cordova: You mentioned that we are looking at disabled people having parity with non-disabled people by 2030, so does that mean that the target in the Equality 2025 strategy is being moved to 2030?

Ms Ghani: I think you are conflating two very separate things—

Sir Roger Gale (in the Chair): Order.

Ms Ghani: Forgive me, Sir Roger—I should not have referenced you.

Sir Roger Gale (in the Chair): Quite right. It is not the Chair’s responsibility to respond to questions, and I take the opportunity to say the same thing to the hon. Member for Battersea (Marsha De Cordova). We really must work in the third person.

Ms Ghani: Forgive me, Sir Roger. I will make sure not to do that again.

The hon. Lady is conflating two issues. There is the 2025 aspiration, but the 2030 target is to ensure that we come into line with the UN’s ambition to ensure accessibility across all modes of transport. We mentioned £300 million for Access for All, and we also have £2 million to help bus operators install new audio-visual equipment on buses, and £2 million to enable the installation of more Changing Places toilets in motorway service areas. The strategy also requests that local authorities pause the installation of new “shared-space” schemes.

Marsha De Cordova: Good.

Ms Ghani: I am glad the hon. Lady is pleased about that. That will apply specifically to new schemes at the design stage that incorporate a level surface. An accessible transport network is central to the Government’s wider ambition to build a society that works for all, regardless of the nature of a person’s disability. People should have the same access to transport and the same opportunities to travel as everyone else, and this is an important measure to reduce social isolation and create opportunities
for people to play a more active role in society. I represented the Department for Transport at the loneliness strategy that was published yesterday, along with the Under-Secretary of State for Digital, Culture, Media and Sport (Tracey Crouch) and the family of Jo Cox, to ensure that transport is seen as a way of ensuring that we tackle isolation.

As the hon. Lady noted, many of our stations—including those in her constituency—are Victorian, and their infrastructure is not fit for today. Those 19th century stations were not built with the needs of 21st century passengers in mind, which has left us with the huge task of opening up the rail network to disabled passengers. Although 70% of journeys are step free, we have continued our commitment to the Access for All programme. The inclusive transport strategy included a commitment to extend our Access for All programme across control period 6 between 2019 and 2024, with an additional £300 million of funding from the public purse. The hon. Lady asked about the £47 million, but that was not cut at all as it has been deferred to that round of funding.

Part of that funding will be used to continue work on the stations that were deferred as part of the 2015 Hendy review, including Battersea Park station—I am pleased that the hon. Lady welcomes that investment.

Those funds will allow design work to restart on all deferred projects from April next year, and once the designs are completed, Network Rail will confirm the construction date for Battersea Park. The project is likely to be difficult to complete, given the nature of the station, but Network Rail has been instructed to continue to work with local stakeholders, including Wandsworth Borough Council. I know that the council has aspirations to improve not just the station but the wider area, going further than the Access for All project.

I am confident that a solution that meets the requirements of all stakeholders can be found. Some of the best Access for All projects have been those where a number of smaller schemes and funding streams have come together to enhance a station greatly. For example, Clapham Junction and Putney both had lifts installed in recent years to make the stations accessible, and other work has been carried out at the same time to reduce congestion. In addition to those stations deferred from the previous round of funding, we will use part of the £300 million fund to make improvements at even more stations. We have asked the industry to nominate stations for new funding by 16 November this year, and I urge all hon. Members to encourage nominations in their constituencies. Nominated stations will be selected based on annual footfall and weighted by the incidence of disability in the area. We will take into account local factors such as proximity to a hospital or the availability of third-party funding for the project, and we will ensure a fair geographical spread of projects across the country.

The hon. Lady will know that neither Queenstown Road nor Wandsworth Town in her constituency have previously been nominated for Access for All funding. Nominations come through the train operating company in partnership with the local authorities, Members of Parliament and, of course, local councillors championing them. I encourage her to liaise with South Western Railway if she wishes these or any other station to be put forward, and ideally to seek a proportion of third-party matched funding that will help to weight the business case. I hope to announce the selected stations by April next year.

I noted that the hon. Member for Manchester, Gorton (Afzal Khan) mentioned a station in his constituency. We are not asking for local communities to drive these campaigns. We are asking for train operating companies to recognise the stations that they would wish to prioritise. We have quite a large sum of funding, £300 million, but we have to ensure that it is spread appropriately. This new £300 million of funding builds on the success of the Access for All programme. So far it has installed accessible, step-free routes at over 200 stations, and around 1,500 stations have benefited from smaller-scale access improvements.

We are also pressing the industry to comply with its legal obligations to ensure that work at stations meets current accessibility standards, not only on flagship projects such as Crossrail, the redevelopment of Birmingham New Street and the TransPennine route upgrade, all of which are delivering significant accessibility improvements, but as part of the business as usual work of their renewals programme, for example by making sure that any replacement bridges have lifts or ramps. It is also important that the industry meets its obligations to anyone who needs assistance, whether they have booked ahead of time or not.

Afzal Khan: Will the Minister explain why it is appropriate to defer the £47 million she talked about when so many disabled people throughout the country are suffering because they do not have fair access to stations? Also, when is the Minister likely to visit Levenshulme, as she has said she will try to do?

Ms Ghani: I am thankful for the intervention, which allows me to clarify that the £47 million has not been deferred. All the deferred stations in the last spending round have been put into this spending round, which is why we have £300 million to spend. I am grateful once again for an invitation to the hon. Gentleman’s constituency; I will see what I can do, but obviously I cannot accept every invitation, although this one is incredibly attractive.

Getting back to the point that the hon. Member for Battersea raised about how much time people have to leave before taking a journey, every passenger should get the best possible help to use the trains, whether booked ahead of time or not, particularly at stations that do not have fully accessible facilities. Each operator is required to have a disabled people’s protection policy in place as part of its licence to operate services. The policy sets out the services that disabled passengers can expect and what to do if things go wrong, and commits the operator to meeting its legal obligations by making reasonable adjustments to their services to allow disabled people to use them, for example by providing an accessible taxi, free of charge, to anyone unable to access a particular station. Through the inclusive transport strategy, we are also looking at how we can improve Passenger Assist to make it more flexible and responsive to real-time changes.

I hope I have demonstrated that this Government are committed to improving access at stations for disabled passengers. Through both specific projects such as Access for All and improvements delivered as part of our wider commitment to improving the rail network. I thank the hon. Member for Battersea and all colleagues for the
Ms Ghani

contributions they have made; I appreciate the frustration of passengers who do not have access to stations in her constituency, but I hope the hon. Lady has been reassured that the Government remain committed to investment that will improve rail services. We want people to continue to benefit from the record levels of funding, including the Access for All investment that will benefit passengers at Battersea station. I am beginning to understand her particular experience of disability and accessibility, and I am more than available to meet her to discuss any issues relating to hidden disabilities that we need to cover through the inclusive transport strategy.

Question put and agreed to.

11.24 am

Sitting suspended.

Road Safety

[Ms Madeleine Moon in the Chair]

2.30 pm

Jack Brereton (Stoke-on-Trent South) (Con): I beg to move,

That this House has considered road safety.

It is a pleasure to serve under you as Chair, Mrs Moon. I am grateful to have secured this important debate. Road safety is an issue that affects every constituency, and I am delighted to see colleagues here from both sides of the House. No doubt they will want to draw my hon. Friend the Minister’s attention to particular roads or even particular accidents, but I will endeavour to keep my remarks as encompassing as possible and to explore how we can best measure and improve road safety as a general rule. I hope that we can have a dispassionate debate about an emotive subject, while always recognising how traumatic failures of road safety can have life-changing implications.

In Great Britain last year, 1,793 people were killed in road crashes—that is 1,793 too many. In addition, the Government estimate that road traffic collisions cost the UK economy more than £16.3 billion a year. In Stoke-on-Trent and Staffordshire alone, all accidents involving speed cost the economy an average of £32.5 million annually. Those costs could be reduced if we made our roads safer.

Last month, the Parliamentary Advisory Council for Transport Safety released a new report, entitled “Developing safe system road safety indicators for the UK”. That timely and interesting report from PACTS will form the basis of my remarks. It was done in association with Ageas, which is one of our largest motor insurers; it employs more than 400 people in my constituency. They are all too aware of the devastation that poor road safety can cause to those injured or bereaved. I am grateful to them for sending me briefing materials and also grateful for input from the Association of British Insurers, the Road Safety Foundation, the Royal National Institute of Blind People, the Institute of Alcohol Studies, Living Streets and Highways England.

The economy has grown every year since 2010, and the population and the volume of road traffic have grown with it. Despite that, the number of road deaths has not grown over the same period, and we can be thankful for that. However, we could be doing better and getting the number of deaths and serious injuries down. More worryingly, the number of pedestrian fatalities accounts for more than one quarter; it is up 5% on the previous year and up 11% on the 2010 to 2014 average.

We have some of the safest roads in the world, but we need to ensure that the general downward trend in road deaths over the past 45 years continues. That was achieved through improved safety measures, technological advances and public awareness campaigns, modifying behaviours and mitigating against elements of previously fatal scenarios. And we are far from exhausting the potential for technological advances, particularly in the field of autonomous cars and smart roads. It is at this time of great technological change that a more comprehensive approach to road safety is needed—something against which both current and new forms of transport can be
tested, and something that is responsive to new technology. The Government are of course aware of that, and it is strongly to their credit that the UK is leading the way in embracing the advances that driverless technology promises to bring.

The Government issued a British road safety statement in 2015. That was followed by the road safety management review commissioned last year and published in June of this year. It is clear that the Government favour a partnership approach, fully respecting devolution and local authority competences. That is all very welcome, and it is welcome that the report by PACTS and Ageas has come forward. In this spirit of encouragement, I ask the Minister to respond to the points raised by the report. In particular, I ask how the Department is progressing towards a safe system approach.

Traditionally, road safety measures have always been far too reactive. Areas with a history of more serious collisions have received far more focus and, often, locations where there is the greatest danger of collisions and a history of near misses do not get the attention that they need. Also, campaigns have focused on getting drivers and vulnerable road users to stop certain behaviours, instead of such behaviours being proactively designed out.

Systemic measures are needed; that is what a safe system is all about. It is an evidence-based approach focused on preventing death and serious injury, rather than preventing all crashes in the face of human error. Because people do make mistakes and collisions do and will take place, a systemic approach recognises that minimising the physical impact of collisions is a shared responsibility for those who design, build, manage and use roads and vehicles. To put it bluntly, if we crash into someone or something, the vehicle and not the people should take the impact and any damage. That means that, as well as expecting road users to comply with the laws on seatbelts, speed limits, not using phones and so on, we should expect, first, vehicle makers to design safer cars, vans, lorries and buses and, secondly, highways agencies to design and maintain legible and forgiving road infrastructure. Thirdly, medical and emergency services should be prepared, trained and equipped to provide an efficient and effective post-crash response.

A key aspect of a safe system approach is the ability to monitor, target and track progress through specific performance indicators. As Dr Suzy Charman of the Road Safety Foundation has said, “You cannot manage what you do not measure. There is a need for road safety performance indicators in order to drive effort and investment in the right direction.”

I would be interested to hear from the Minister what consideration has been given to devising any indicators beyond those EuroRAP—European Road Assessment Programme—indicators that are already in use for the strategic road network. I would be especially keen to hear his early responses to the eight indicators proposed in the PACTS report. I will briefly run through the indicators set out in the report.

Graham Stringer (Blackley and Broughton) (Lab): I am listening carefully to the hon. Gentleman. Before he gets on to the eight indicators, would he agree with me that it is already known where the most dangerous roads are? They are often roads over moors, in rural areas, where overtaking takes the car on to the other side of the road, and there are often head-on collisions, which lead to fatalities. Improving those roads should be the focus of the Government’s investment policy. Does the hon. Gentleman agree?

Jack Brereton: I agree to an extent, in that those are some of the key roads where investment should be prioritised. There are also far too many accidents occurring in urban areas—hits particularly involving pedestrians, which are obviously much more prevalent in towns and cities, where an accident can be much more serious.

I will go through the eight specific indicators. The first is compliance with speed limits on national roads. Speeding currently accounts for about one fifth of road fatalities. The second indicator is compliance with speed limits on local roads. Data collection for both those speed indicators would be through existing speed monitoring equipment and self-reporting in, for example, the Royal Automobile Club survey, which already identifies this.

Obviously, speed is not everything when it comes to reducing dangers, so the third point is abstinence from alcohol and drug consumption. That is a key indicator. Nearly 15% of road crash fatalities involve a driver exceeding the legal alcohol limit. I am told by the Institute of Alcohol Studies that deaths caused by drink–driving are now at their highest rate since 2012. Meanwhile, it is estimated that some 200 road deaths a year—more than 10% of road deaths—are drug-driving related.

The fourth indicator is the percentage of car occupants using a seatbelt, child seats or child restraints. For many people, wearing a seatbelt is now second nature, but, despite it being illegal not to wear a seatbelt, not enough people are wearing seatbelts. Not wearing a seatbelt accounts for between 20% and 30% of road fatalities among car occupants. That is more than 150 deaths a year.

The fifth indicator relates to one of the more recent legislative changes; it is the percentage of drivers not using an in-car or hands-free phone. It can be difficult to establish when mobile phone use has contributed to a crash, but it is reported that dozens of fatal crashes involve the use of a mobile phone.

The sixth indicator is the percentage of new passenger cars with the highest European New Car Assessment Programme safety rating, which is obviously important for the quality and design of vehicles. An academic study cited in the PACTS report has estimated that the risk of fatal injuries is dramatically reduced in five-star-rated vehicles by as much as 68% compared with two-star-rated vehicles. The seventh indicator is the percentage of roads with the highest relevant International Road Assessment Programme safety rating, broken down by road type. The final proposed indicator is the percentage of emergency medical vehicles arriving at an accident within 18 minutes of notification.

Those are the eight indicators set out in the report by PACTS and Ageas. Some data will be more challenging than others to collect. The report identifies a number of sources and methods for that collection. It also lists alternative indicators that were considered but rejected because of the difficulties in accurate data collection, such as cyclists not wearing the correct type of helmet, which would be quite difficult to calculate.
Ruth Cadbury (Brentford and Isleworth) (Lab): I thank the hon. Gentleman for securing this debate. I want to pick up on one thing he said about cyclists not wearing the correct kind of helmet. Is he aware that there is no requirement on cyclists to wear helmets in this country? In fact, in most countries where cycling is an awful lot more prevalent than it is in this country, most people do not wear helmets, because they do not need to.

Jack Brereton: I think that is an issue. I encourage more people to wear a helmet, because the more they do so, the lower the risk. I recognise that on the continent there is more of a cycling culture, and that we do not see as much of that in this country, outside of London. It is challenging in many communities to encourage people to use cycling as an alternative. I always say to my constituents that wearing a helmet is a way of ensuring that they have the best possible protection and safety on our roads.

As I was saying, it would be interesting to know whether the Department for Transport intends to explore such potential key performance indicators for non-motorised road use and for road crossers, such as those on foot—that also relates to cyclists. I recognise the danger that too many indicators might dilute that focus.

A further danger is that indicators can become targets that skew priorities. I think that the PACTS report is helpful for recognising the importance of having effective comparative data that can be trusted to assess road safety.

It is essential for indicators to go beyond the fatal and seriously injured figure—the KSI figure, as it is known. As the former co-chair of the Staffordshire Safer Roads Partnerships, prior to my election to this House, I am quite impressed by the thinking and working that has gone into this report. It is aligned with the progress that is being made at a local and national level, following the Government’s determination to reduce the number of fatalities on our roads.

Of course, actions to improve road safety must be data-led—we must take proportionate action that has a meaningful impact—but the data needs to be broader and take a more systemic view. If we consider the Stoke-on-Trent figures for 2016 as an example, the KSI figure showed an increase of 74%, but within the context of a 5% reduction of overall reported casualties over the same period. There are clearly issues with using the KSI figure alone on a local network level, as significant short-term percentage changes can be caused by a small number of particularly deadly collisions.

As the Government’s road safety statement notes, 98% of the road network in England is local roads, and local action needs to be encouraged and respected. I would be interested in hearing how the Department is getting on with initiatives to spread good practice from one authority to another, particularly on more controversial schemes, such as shared space roads, which the RNIB has raised concerns about.

Another area of controversy is the use of speed cameras. In an age of high levels of accountability, the public increasingly demand transparency. Sometimes speed cameras are seen, unfortunately, as nothing more than a cash cow, to help to meet tightened public finances. We need to ensure that there is public confidence in road safety measures, that we communicate with motorists effectively and that actions on speed—such as putting in cameras or vans—remain reasonable and build on justified, tangible improvements in road safety. Better indicators and data collection may well help to justify such actions.

Mr Gregory Campbell (East Londonderry) (DUP): I congratulate the hon. Gentleman on securing the debate. On the issue of speed cameras and their locations, does he agree that it is essential that the wider public—pedestrians and motorists—see that they are positioned in such a way as to help to prevent accidents, rather than to apprehend motorists who might happen to be doing 31 mph in a 30 mph zone?

Jack Brereton: I certainly agree that that should be the case. That is why it is so important that the work is data-led, so that the public can have confidence that cameras are used only in locations where there is a justifiable need for them. I think that that is particularly important when it comes to things such as speed cameras, where motorists are being fined.

Moving on to working locally, it has become increasingly clear, as the PACTS report recognises, that road safety is not just about speed or chasing previous collision history, but about ensuring that actions are focused on reducing dangers more widely. Sometimes, making motorists feel safer has the perverse effect of making them drive more dangerously, but if they are made alert to possible risks, they drive with greater attention. It was, for example, a brave decision for Westminster City Council to remove the pedestrian railings at Oxford Circus when the crossing was redesigned to include diagonal lines. I think we would all agree that that has been a success. It works through behavioural measures—through a nudge, as they say.

It is not only Westminster that is innovating and taking bold steps forward to tackle broader dangers on our roads. Across the country, we are increasingly seeing proactive partnerships, like the one we have in Staffordshire, which represents a change in approach from local service providers. There is an increasing shift towards more holistic preventive actions through a whole range of methods, with the local community stepping up to take greater responsibility to improve safety on their roads. That means more work in schools and with community groups, to teach people about safety and encourage more responsible road usage. Many communities are also developing speed watches in their towns and villages, with local residents volunteering time to encourage safer road usage. After all, the people who drive most irresponsibly and dangerously are often part of those communities, and peer pressure from friends and neighbours can be a powerful tool—more powerful than directions from central Government. I am glad that Whitehall now recognises that.

In conclusion, I hope that the improved use of safety indicators is under serious consideration and progressing well. We need to bolster the trend towards broader preventive and community-led initiatives that best encourage behavioural change and more responsible road usage from everyone. Making data available will be key to that, as will spreading information and examples of best practice in road safety across local partnerships, which will deliver the improvements that we all want to see. I think PACTS and Ageas have made a great contribution.
Liz McInnes (Heywood and Middleton) (Lab): I appreciate the hon. Gentleman’s giving way, because I know he is winding up. Will he say a little bit about the Government’s consultation last year on causing death or serious injury by dangerous driving? Yesterday was the anniversary of the Government’s statement that they would bring in tougher sentences for those crimes, but nothing has happened in the last year. Will he say something about the possible deterrent effect of a tougher sentence for dangerous driving?

Jack Brereton: I know that that issue is important to the hon. Lady, and we had a brief discussion about it earlier. It is important that we have tough and appropriate sentences, but they are only part of the picture. As I have set out, there are several ways in which we should encourage safer driving. It is not just about encouragement, but about designing a safer road system and taking a holistic approach to road safety. I hope that the Minister keenly anticipates, as I do, the forthcoming Ageas-supported Road Safety Foundation annual risk mapping and performance tracking report, which will be launched on 30 October and entitled “Getting Back on Track”. The Minister is always on track—or, I should say, on road—so I look forward to his response.

Jim Fitzpatrick (Poplar and Limehouse) (Lab): I am pleased to see you presiding over our proceedings, Mrs Moon. I congratulate the hon. Member for Stoke-on-Trent South (Jack Brereton) on securing this important debate. I will do my best to be brief, given how many hon. Members want to contribute.

I chair Fire Aid, an international charity that delivers pillar 5 post-crash response to 40 countries using staff and equipment from the UK fire and rescue service and its supply chain. Our constituent members also use the Department for Transport’s excellent THINK! road safety education material and are grateful for it. I thank the Parliamentary Advisory Council for Transport Safety, Anderson Etika and David Davies; Cycling UK, especially Roger Geffen; and the all-party parliamentary group on cycling and Adam Coffman for their briefings for the debate, which I am sure hon. Members found extremely useful.

There is a concern, which I am sure the Minister shares, that casualty reductions have plateaued in recent years. PACTS writes that its members are particularly interested to hear more about the refreshed road safety statement and two-year action plan, which was trailed as being due out in October. I hope the Minister can tell us when that will actually be seen.

I have raised the issue of targets with the Minister before. As he knows, PACTS and many others would like the Government to adopt casualty reduction targets. There is some encouragement, which perhaps the Minister can say more about, in the fact that the Department appears to be reconsidering their advantages. There is a recognition that targets are not a magic bullet, but the absence of a UK target badly undermines our claim to be an international leader in road safety. In the UK, we have a plethora of targets set by various bodies with different dates, baselines and definitions, including one set by the Department for Transport for Highways England, and we endorse United Nations and EU casualty reduction targets, but do not have our own.

Targets can be aspirational, and the Government have adopted them in a range of public policy areas such as NHS waiting times, reducing suicide, vehicle emissions and greenhouse gases. Given that road crashes are the largest cause of death and injury for young people and many of us in our daily lives, surely they deserve equal priority.

If possible, I would like the Minister to say something about about 20 mph zones. Everybody supports them and they have appeared all over the country, but we all recognise that without physical restraints or technological equipment, just putting up signs that say 20 mph does not achieve anything.

I would also be grateful if the Minister commented on the number of traffic police and enforcement officers. There have been massive reductions in the number of police officers around the country, which would suggest that the number of traffic police has also been significantly reduced. If he could say something about that, and about the last time that he discussed the numbers with his ministerial counterpart at the Home Office, that would be helpful.

The cycling community has expressed angst about the Minister’s review of dangerous cycling. As a cyclist, I see far too many fellow cyclists going through red lights and pedestrian crossings, and the tragic incidents that have taken place warrant a review of dangerous cycling. The cycling community says that there also needs to be a review of dangerous driving, however, and that the Government need to show an approach to both rather than just focusing on cycling.

Cycling UK makes reference to the fact that convicted drivers routinely evade driving bans by claiming that it could cause exceptional hardship. As of June 2017, more than 10,000 drivers in Britain were still permitted to drive despite having more than 12 points on their licence. Perhaps the Minister will comment on that and the question raised by my hon. Friend the Member for Heywood and Middleton (Liz McInnes) about convictions and the punishment fitting the crime—the Government have been promising to make a statement on that for some time.

This ought not to be a party political issue, as the hon. Member for Stoke-on-Trent South, whom I congratulate again on securing this important debate, and the number of hon. Members from both sides of the House who want to speak demonstrate, but the Government have to recognise that there is disappointment. To go back to targets, there was a 30-year consensus. Targets were introduced by the Thatcher Administration in the ’80s and parties of both colours kept to them for all that time. They were effective in reducing the numbers of people being killed and seriously injured on our roads. I am keen to hear whether the Minister has any news on that.

As a former Road Safety Minister, I know that the issue presents huge challenges, but the Minister is highly regarded and trusted so he has an opportunity to restore the confidence of road safety campaign organisations and hon. Members present. We hope that his refreshed road safety strategy and two-year action plan does just that.

Several hon. Members rose—
Mrs Madeleine Moon (in the Chair): Order. Before I call Stephen Kerr, I ask hon. Members to show consideration for one another. If they keep their speeches to about four and a half minutes, we could get everyone in.

2.56 pm

Stephen Kerr (Stirling) (Con): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Mrs Moon. I commend my hon. Friend the Member for Stoke-on-Trent South (Jack Brereton) on securing this important debate. I pay tribute to the Scottish Fire and Rescue Service, Police Scotland and the Central Scotland Road Safety Partnership, which delivers the “Safe Drive Stay Alive” campaign every year, as I have previously remarked on in the House. The highly effective campaign includes an evocative and emotive live presentation designed to change behaviour and thinking about the responsibilities that we have when we sit behind the wheel of a car.

I want to speak about my constituent, Mrs Elizabeth Billett, who came to see me a few months ago because she had read something in the Stirling Observer that vividly brought back memories of what had happened to her grandson, whom she had brought up. Her case was previously mentioned in the House by my predecessor, Dame Anne McGuire, but I mention it again because the essence of my speech is to ask the Minister what more can be done to help foreign drivers who visit the UK driving on the wrong side of the road. The essence of my speech is to ask the Minister what more can be done to help foreign drivers who visit this country to be aware of the need to stay on the correct side of the road. I will also raise points that are outside his remit as a Minister, but which I hope he will contemplate and perhaps offer a view on.

Mrs Billett came to talk to me about her grandson, Andrew McLean, who was 22 years old when the car he was driving was hit by someone driving on the wrong side of the road. That person happened to be a French driver, again on the wrong side of the road. In Stirling, one of the cameras was in the area to highlight the issue of what to do about speeding. People came to that meeting to express their concerns, and I was also greatly indebted to my friend Charles Pedrick, who has done more than anyone I know in the area to highlight the issue of what to do about speeding. He organised the meeting, with the support of Martin Surl, Gloucestershire’s police and crime commissioner, who has put his money where his mouth is by partly paying for two automatic number plate recognition cameras—one in Whiteshill, which is why we were there, and the other one in Rodborough. The cameras have demonstrated that, in the main, people are law-abiding, but those who break the law do so in a hideous way, by driving at 70 mph through a 30 mph zone.

My first question to the Minister—this is why I will be brief—is whether it is possible that we could use the data that has been collected. In Gloucestershire, about 100,000 pieces of data have been collected in the year or so since the two ANPR cameras have been up. At the moment, that data is used by the police. They go and knock on a door, in extremis, or they send letters to those who have offended seriously, not once or twice but on a regular basis. Is it possible that we could use that data more proactively, so that we can catch these people out?

I was genuinely shocked when I tabled a parliamentary question about how many people in Gloucestershire were banned from driving. Given how serious speeding and drink-driving are, the number is infinitesimally small, and that is because we do not seem to have any joined-up action. Can we use that information to crack down on those people who are making other people’s lives a misery?

Of course, it is not only people who are affected by speeding but cows and horses. There are a number of commons in my constituency. Every year, when the
cows are put out we lose about 12 of them, because they are knocked down. However, it is not just a case of knocking down an animal; such incidents have a hideous impact on the affected farmers, who have to pick up the beast and who also often lose out financially. There is very little that can be done about the perpetrators. We ought to be able to do much more to them. If anyone hits an animal in a car, it is their own fault; they were driving without due care and attention. Is there something more that we can do to follow up on those individuals who have had accidents and caused all this disruption?

The same is true of horses. We are considering how we can have safer bridleways, but how do people get to those safer bridleways? We need to consider, very carefully, how the network can be joined up, to ensure that people are able to ride their horses safely, without people rushing past them at 60 mph.

My last point comes from the meeting I attended last week and it is a request to look at traffic regulation orders. Can we have a way in which we can make villages more composite, so that each village does not have to pay quite a large sum of money to get a TRO to reduce the speed in their area to 20 mph, which is largely recognised as being what villages need?

If the Minister could answer those questions in the short time that he has today, I would be very grateful.

3.4 pm

Derek Thomas (St Ives) (Con): Safety on our roads is obviously an important issue; it is also one that we have discussed here in Parliament before. The countryside is changing and has been for many years, and yet country roads are not changing, except perhaps for repairs of a few potholes and patchy resurfacing. I am talking in particular about roads in rural areas.

I credit my hon. Friend the Member for Stoke-on-Trent South (Jack Brereton), first, for securing the debate—it is a fantastic debate on an important issue—and, secondly, for highlighting the hazards and deaths on our roads. Devon and Cornwall police have recently diverted resources from fighting what we might call traditional crime, such as burglary, to keeping our roads safer. They recently launched their “No Excuse” campaign, which challenges road users who, basically, break clear rules about road safety and thereby cause injury and death. It is a shame that, because of that and the inability to maintain improvements to the roads, resources are being diverted in this way.

Attention really must be given to designing out danger, as well as to managing driver error and behaviour. As a rural constituency MP in west Cornwall, a number of issues are raised with me on a regular basis; indeed, I have raised many of them in this place before. As I have said, the countryside is changing. However, as a local MP I believe that I have exhausted every possible route other than to raise these issues with the Minister, which is disappointing. I would like to hear from him today what tools MPs can use to get their local authorities and others to focus their efforts on areas where there is clearly a danger, as well as a concern, and where local communities are genuinely worried about what is going on in their neighbourhoods and outside their houses.

I would really like to know from the Minister what more I can do on roads such as, for example, the A30 at Treereife junction, which I was involved with even before I was elected to this House. The A30 is a very busy road that takes people to Land’s End and the junction is tricky, and advertised as such. Years ago, red was painted on it to slow people down. However, that red paint has now gone, and despite many efforts and petitions, Cornwall Council seems completely uninterested in making the junction safer.

In New Road, there is simply a need for a pedestrian crossing from a massive housing area across to the beach. Again, however, the local authority has shown no interest.

As I have said, the countryside is changing. We have huge vehicles, including agricultural vehicles, using our roads. Often they use minor roads, and in a village called Leedstown, which is on the B3302, it has been established that speeding takes place. I have had many meetings with the council, huge petitions have been created by the local community and lots of concerns have been accepted, but there has been no action whatsoever. The council blames the police for not enforcing the law; the police blame the council for not improving the roads. And in Ashton and in Breage, the situation is exactly the same.

The Minister and the Secretary of State will be aware of our concern about the A30 in Crowlas. It is the main road that takes people into Penzance, which has a population of more than 20,000 people. It is a single-carriageway road that takes people to that end of Cornwall. The money has been secured to make it safer—indeed, it was secured some time ago—but there has been absolutely no action. So I would love it if the Minister could give Highways England and Cornwall Council a call, to ask them why they have not acted when they have the money to do so.

Finally, on Sunday there was a three-car crash, which resulted in life-changing injuries for one individual, on the A30 from Camborne to Penzance. I recently talked to Highways England in Bristol about that road and it said that there was no more that it could do; it needs the money to do so. So I would have a word with the Secretary of State to ensure that a route appraisal is included in the second road investment strategy, or RIS 2. I thought that I would take the opportunity today to make that point, particularly to the Minister. So, please include a route appraisal in RIS 2.

3.9 pm

Jim Shannon (Strangford) (DUP): It is a pleasure to speak in this debate under your chairmanship today, Mrs Moon.

I congratulate the hon. Member for Stoke-on-Trent South (Jack Brereton) on bringing this issue forward and giving us all a chance to participate in this debate.

I will very quickly give a flavour of what is happening in Northern Ireland, as I do in nearly every debate in Westminster Hall, because it is always important to have the statistics that back up the story we are trying to tell.

In Northern Ireland we had 9,737 casualties on our roads last year. Obviously, we have to do better. Road safety is a multifaceted issue and a multifaceted approach is needed. Speeding is a clear issue. All hon. Members who have spoken so far have said that, and will continue to say that. According to statistics released by the Department for Infrastructure, 69% of drivers broke the speed limit on built-up roads in Northern Ireland.
Whereas 50% of them drove too fast on single and dual carriageways, speeding on motorways was down by 30%, so there are some good things. The majority of pedestrian casualties occur in built-up areas. Again, we need to highlight that issue. Twenty-nine of the 34 child pedestrians and 302 of the 413 adult pedestrians who were killed in 2016 died on built-up roads.

Pedal cyclists are also vulnerable in built-up areas. More than half of the cyclist deaths in 2016, 58 out of 102, and most cyclist injuries in that year, almost 17,000 out of nearly 18,500, occurred on built-up roads. Although rural areas have their own particular issues, built-up areas are where the real pressure seems to be. In 2016, 789 people were killed, almost 16,000 were seriously injured and 113,055 were slightly injured. If someone is driving at 40 mph and they hit a child, they will probably kill them; at 30 mph, the child has an 80% chance of survival; and at 20 mph, the child is likely to survive being hit, with only minor injuries. So it is clear that we need to drive in built-up areas at a speed that is not a threat to other people.

Inexperience does not end with passing the test, which is why the Police Service of Northern Ireland, the Northern Ireland Fire and Rescue Service, which the hon. Member for Poplar and Limehouse (Jim Fitzpatrick) referred to, the Northern Ireland Ambulance Service and the Institute of Advanced Motorists have a scheme that involves on-road driving assessments, manoeuvrability tests, road-safe and wellbeing exhibitions and simulated fatal car crashes. Those are important steps in the way forward to educating people and raising awareness.

Teaching our young drivers is essential. We must address the fact that they do not have lessons on motorways, and their first trip up the road to university, changing lanes and navigating, is simply dangerous, so we must look at that issue as well.

I very much support the scheme that we have back home in Northern Ireland; I suspect it is probably evident in other parts of the United Kingdom as well. Our education programmes in high schools feature personal stories, often from young people who have been disabled in accidents. There are graphic demonstrations or dramatisations to influence the attitude of young students driving for the first time. I remind the Minister that the insurance companies do some monitoring of first-time drivers. The scheme to reduce insurance and to monitor the speed of cars is a good scheme.

I also have concerns about horse deaths on the roads. The British Horse Society is aware of some 2,914 reports of road incidents involving horses; 230 horses have died and 39 riders have lost their lives. We need to remind people how to drive at the right speed at the right place. There might be a 60 mph national speed limit, but sometimes it is safe only to drive at 40. When it might be safe to drive at 60, some people doing 20 mph is an issue that must be addressed as well. There is work to do, and there must be funding for a strategy. I look to the Minister for the strategy and for the funding to back it up. I welcome the fact that in Northern Ireland we have put measures in outside schools. We have put in schemes to reduce speed, which will increase safety for children at school.

3.13 pm

Ruth Cadbury (Brentford and Isleworth) (Lab): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Mrs Moon, in this important debate.

We have had so many statements from the Government and debates in this House about one or more of the issues of congestion, air pollution, obesity, diabetes, poor physical and mental health, and the decline in our high streets’ economies. I have two solutions to all those, which do not cost a lot to the public purse or to our constituents: cycling and walking. I shall focus mainly on the first: more people cycling more often to work, school, the shops, to visit friends and family and all those other journeys that we take as part of day-to-day life.

Unfortunately, too few people in this country cycle regularly. The single greatest reason why British people, most of whom own bikes, do not cycle as part of their daily or weekly activities is fear for their safety. If the road culture and infrastructure were safer, more people would cycle. So we need to normalise cycling, as many of our competitor countries have done, as a safe and convenient activity for people of all ages and abilities, with all the health, environmental, economic and quality of life benefits that that would yield. We can do that only if the Government focus on the safety of those who are on bikes and on foot.

I want to express my concern at the Government’s announcement of a new review specifically of cycling offences in 2017 in response to one admittedly awful case involving a pedestrian killed in a collision with Charlie Alliston, who was illegally riding a fixed-wheel bike, which illegally lacked a front brake, on the road. I believe a much wider overhaul of our laws is needed, as promised by Ministers more than four years ago.

I shall focus on the key issues that reflect the five main headings of the “safe systems” approach adopted in the Government’s road safety statement. On safer roads and junctions, we were promised new standards for cycle-friendly planning so that they consistently applied in all new roads and traffic schemes, new developments and planned highway maintenance works. It cannot be right that new housing estates are built in this country with not only no segregated cycle paths, but sometimes no footways, either. The Government should show leadership in all new developments, housing schemes, rail infrastructure and major roads, as well as leading on retrofitting our existing urban and rural infrastructure.

We need work in every town and city so that we can all be served with a safe network of segregated cycle routes on main roads, safe quietways on minor roads, and safe accessible places to lock or store cycles, and that needs a shift of some—not a lot, proportionately—of transport capital funding. The earmarked UK Government spending for cycling and walking in 2019-20 will decline to just 37p per person; just a fraction of the £10 per head called for by my group, the all-party parliamentary group on cycling, in our 2013 “Get Britain Cycling” report and by the Transport Committee’s own 2014 report on cycle safety.

We ask that the Government adopt continental-style rules to give greater safety and priority to pedestrians and cyclists at junctions, as promoted by British Cycling’s “Turning the Corner” campaign. This is based on the
The principle that drivers turning at a junction give way to pedestrians and cyclists travelling straight ahead across their path. We hope that that will be incorporated into The Highway Code.

We need to build a nation of safer drivers. It goes without saying that all road users should respect the rules of the road and the safety of others, which means a combination of education and enforcement, as other speakers have said today. We need better driver awareness of cycle safety, including new and consistent advice in The Highway Code, to be reinforced through public awareness campaigns. We need to strengthen roads policing and the capacity to enforce. We need to review traffic laws and penalties to clarify, for instance, the distinction between careless and dangerous offences. We need to make use of driving bans, reducing the ability of convicted drivers to evade such bans, and we need tougher penalties overall.

We must invest in cycle training for children and adults to give them more confidence in cycling on the roads. Provision is currently a postcode lottery. Such training also leads to safe driving behaviour for those who have experienced it. After all, HGV drivers regularly include cycle training as part of their driving training. I had hoped to mention more of the recommendations today, but time is short. We look forward to working with the Minister on the recommendations.

3.18 pm

Jessica Morden (Newport East) (Lab): I congratulate the hon. Member for Stoke-on-Trent South (Jack Brereton) on securing this important debate on an issue that clearly and obviously has much cross-party support and interest. I want to speak today on behalf of my constituents, the Smith family from Llandeveda, who tragically lost their daughter Rhiannon, aged just 21, in a road collision last year. I want to pay tribute to them for their way in which they have bravely and relentlessly campaigned ever since for measures to make our roads safer, to prevent such events from happening to other families.

Alongside their work on local road safety issues, the family established the Rhiannon Jade Smith Memorial Trust, which held its first Welsh road safety conference last month at the Celtic Manor in Newport. It was extremely well attended and covered a large range of road safety issues, many of which were touched on today. Experts who attended included Rod King, from the “20’s Plenty For Us” campaign, which advocates the potential benefits of default 20 mph speed limits in urban and residential areas, except where it makes sense to retain 30 mph speed limits. My Welsh Assembly colleague, John Griffiths, is campaigning on that with the Welsh Government, and it was the subject of a recent debate.

Gwent police Chief Inspector Martyn Smith, who is responsible for our roads policing, and police and crime commissioner Jeff Cuthbert, spoke about how they are tackling alcohol and drug driving as well as those who use their phones behind the wheel. I agree with my hon. Friend the Member for Poplar and Limehouse (Jim Fitzpatrick) that cuts to police and traffic officers make their job far more difficult, and that that needs to be addressed as a matter of urgency. We also heard from Sarah Jones, of Public Health Wales, who talked in favour of graduated driving licences. Those are obviously targeted at younger drivers and they exist in other countries. She is a passionate advocate of them. It would be interesting to hear the Minister’s views on both the 20 mph campaign and graduated driving licences.

We talked about the need for a dedicated road collision investigation branch, similar to those that investigate rail, maritime and air accidents, which would look at road accident data, analyse incidents and spot any trends, to identify solutions. I know that the Smith family would like me to raise that specifically with the Minister today. Obviously, it would not replace the work of the coroners and police, but it would work on top of that, to analyse trends, and would have the potential to save more lives.

I was pleased to see the Government’s announcement in the summer of a dedicated branch run by the RAC Foundation as a pilot. I look forward to hearing the results so far from the Minister, so that that approach can grow. Countries such as Sweden have used it effectively for many years, and it would be interesting to see how far the Government have got. Like my hon. Friend the Member for Poplar and Limehouse, I think targets are important; it is time that the Department for Transport thought again about the national road safety targets, which were scrapped in 2010.

I draw the Minister’s attention to the suggestion for an all-Wales fatal collision review board, which South Wales police are working on. They have proposed a model similar to the national road collision investigation unit, where a board of experts would meet regularly to discuss categories of drivers or road users who are particularly high-risk and review fatal collisions to consider trends. All kinds of bodies and partners could be included. It would be good if the Minister looked at that, and specifically at cross-border working with the Welsh Government. It is important to learn road safety lessons wherever we can.

We are clearly not making the progress on road safety and fatalities that we should expect as a nation. The Government’s projections show an increase in local traffic of up to 50% by 2040, so clearly we must do more and collaborate better to make roads safer.

3.23 pm

Bill Grant (Ayr, Carrick and Cumnock) (Con): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship this afternoon, Mrs Moon. I congratulate my hon. Friend the Member for Stoke-on-Trent South (Jack Brereton) on securing this debate, whose importance is self-evident, given the Members attending it.

Having served for 31 years in the fire service, and sadly over that time having attended many needless and avoidable road traffic crashes, I believe that the importance of road safety in all its forms throughout the UK must never be underestimated. Many of the events in question ended with fatalities or life-changing injuries. As we have heard today, the impact extends to the families of the individuals, and that must be considered. The needless loss of a loved one in a road traffic crash can be continually devastating.

Before the emergency services arrive at an incident, many people find they are trapped in not only a crushed motor vehicle but a twilight world between life and death. It is often wet, miserable, cold and bleak. In a rural area it might be in an insecure and isolated place. I, and many others in the fire, police and ambulance services, have on many occasions had the privilege...
simply of holding someone’s hand, squeezing it gently and speaking to them quietly, making the promise—not knowing whether it can be kept—“We’ll soon have you out of here,” while mentally formulating a plan to achieve that important goal.

In those 30-plus years, I have seen many improvements to vehicles and, indeed, to legislation—I commend manufacturers for improvements such as airbags, crumple zones, improved braking systems, side impact systems and so on. Many people owe their lives to those developments. Legislators can be proud of introducing the compulsory wearing of seatbelts, and of crash helmets for motorcyclists. I take the point that has been eloquently made that we should perhaps be on the journey towards the compulsory wearing of head safety gear by cyclists on the streets today. Not least of all such measures is the breathalyser, although it is sad to note that, despite it, the relevant statistics are rising. That is shameful and disgraceful.

My hon. Friend the Member for Stoke-on-Trent South ably emphasised the importance of the recent report on developing safe system road safety indicators. I do not intend to repeat what was said, but in the report, PACTS raises the importance of securing statistics in the form of eight key performance indicators. I, for one, would welcome those KPIs on road safety, but with the proviso that they should be used wisely and actively by road authorities, police, policy makers and other stakeholders. That might include the Chancellor, with respect to investment.

The intention should be to reduce road traffic crashes. Statistics tell us that currently 71 deaths or serious injuries occur every day in the UK. That must be unacceptable. There is no value in gathering useful data and not putting it to use. All of us present in the Chamber are concerned about the fact that the trend for improvement in road traffic fatalities and serious injuries has in recent years ceased. The improvement has plateaued and bottomed out: the figures for 2017 show another year of no improvement with respect to the reduction in deaths and serious injuries on the UK’s roads. It is not good enough.

We need to ensure that the driving test keeps up with new developments. I hope that I will not be misunderstood, as it is not always a matter of young drivers—some people do pass their test when they are older, and there are mature gentlemen like me who cause road accidents. Aspects of the test might be how to cope with driverless vehicles, which will soon be on the roads and could be encountered in the not-too-distant future. Drivers and riders should be encouraged proactively and continually to self-assess their abilities to drive in a safe manner. Should they be driving? People need to be safe to drive. That is especially relevant when people are affected by illnesses notifiable to the DVLA.

It may be hard when someone reaches my time in life to give up what they have done for 40 or 50 years or more, but perhaps it is wise to give it some thought, or seek serious advice about whether they should do it. There is a balance between the young and the old. Educating drivers on managing everyday tiredness and fatigue is an enormous factor in accident prevention. It will be interesting to assess the data gathered on that, if the PACTS recommendations are brought forward. I would be pleased if the PACTS recommendations on statistics gathering were introduced. However, in tandem with gathering data for future years, we must endeavour to secure improvements across the field of road safety year on year. I am encouraged by the work that various agencies and Governments undertake to arrest the increase in fatalities and serious accidents.

We recognise that things are not working as they should at the moment. I know a great deal is being done, but further improvements will be achieved through education of individuals as much as improvements to the environment in which they drive—something that has been mentioned before. There is recognition that improvement is needed in some of those areas. I welcome the KPIs. I think that they will be a good step, and I hope that the Minister will consider introducing them.

Several hon. Members rose—

Mrs Madeleine Moon (in the Chair): Order. I need to call the first Front-Bench speaker at 3.33 pm.

3.28 pm

Jack Dromey (Birmingham, Erdington) (Lab): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Mrs Moon. I congratulate the hon. Member for Stoke-on-Trent South (Jack Brereton) on initiating the debate. I want to raise an issue that is rarely discussed in the context of road safety—driver eyesight. My interest—indeed, my passion—about the issue arises from a terrible incident in my constituency two years ago. Poppy-Arabella Clarke—three years old, a delightful girl and the apple of her mum’s and dad’s eye—was crossing the Chester Road with her mother, Rachel. She was run down by a driver who was 72, and who had been told twice in the previous three weeks that he should never drive again, although he continued to do so. The family are devastated to this day.

We need a common-sense approach towards this—indeed, on other issues we have had such common-sense engagement with the Government. Five years ago Avril Gold’s two daughters, who were in their early 20s, were crossing the Walsall Road. They got hit by a driver who was doing 64 miles an hour, and Sarah died. Bizarrely, the individual who was behind the wheel got four years in jail and a four-year driving ban, and he started serving the driving ban on day one of being in jail. We engaged with the then Justice Minister, the right hon. Member for Hemel Hempstead (Sir Mike Penning), and the law was changed so that such bans will now run consecutively. In a similar vein, I hope that the Government will approach with common sense the issue of what needs to be done about driver eyesight.

I wish to make three points. First, as things stand, when we take a driving test we have to read a number plate from 20 metres. That is a lamentably poor measure of visual acuity, so why not improve it? The original number plate test dates back 80 years to 1937. It is a comparatively weak test, and across Europe there is a much more robust approach. Of 29 countries assessed by the European Council of Optometry and Optics, the UK was one of only five that required just a licence plate test. Furthermore, in 22 of the 29 countries assessed, a doctor or ophthalmologist is required to carry out an eye test, yet in the UK, only the driving instructor conducts the test on the day. Evidence from Brake
suggested that the public would support such a measure, and polling shows that 67% of the general public believe that the system should change.

There is also a case for the introduction of regular eyesight tests during our driving lives, because at no point do most drivers ever have to take an eye test. Again, if we consider the European experience we see that some countries such as Hungary and Finland require an eye test from drivers in their 40s, and a further 13 countries require an eye test at 70, 75 or 80. We know from evidence provided by Brake and data from Direct Line that British drivers are not getting their eyes tested on a regular basis. Indeed, 12% of drivers never get their eyes tested, and 16% of drivers have had an accident in the past two years. For those who have problems with their eyesight, the figure for those involved in an accident increases to 67%. There is a strong case for us to do something in the United Kingdom, as has happened in many countries throughout Europe.

There is also the question of older drivers. Under UK law, once someone reaches 70 they must renew their driving licence, but they self-certify that they are fit to drive. There is no requirement for a medical—people just fill out a form and stay on the road. According to evidence from the Driver and Vehicle Licensing Agency, there are 4.5 million drivers over 70, and 100,000 over 90. The overwhelming majority of those people drive safely—indeed, statistically the big problem is not older drivers; it is young men. Having said that, there has been rapid growth in the number of older drivers, and as we live longer the number of drivers over 70 and over 90 increases—there are 3,700 drivers over 90 in the west midlands alone.

In conclusion, we hope that the Government will consider a range of measures, including a mandatory obligation for an ophthalmologist or doctor to report to the DVLA anyone they examine who cannot drive safely. It is somewhat surprising that the road safety strategy does not refer to eye testing, and I hope that the Minister will agree that these are real issues. We have already engaged with the Minister and had constructive discussions, and I hope that the Government will be prepared to take the necessary action, because never again should we have a tragedy such as the one that befell Poppy-Arabella Clarke.

3.34 pm

Marion Fellows (Motherwell and Wishaw) (SNP): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Mrs Moon, and I congratulate the hon. Member for Stoke-on-Trent South (Jack Brereton) on securing this important and, as it turns out, wide-ranging debate. It is my duty to sum up the debate, and I hope hon. Members will forgive me if I miss any salient points. I shall start with the previous speaker, because I felt that the hon. Member for Birmingham, Erdington (Jack Dromey) was directing his remarks at me, although I will try not to take it too personally. I recently had an eye operation, and at the moment I have a self-imposed ban on driving, even though I have been reliably informed by my consultant that I am fit to drive. The hon. Gentleman’s points were well made.

The hon. Member for Stoke-on-Trent South introduced the debate with a wide-ranging discussion that covered traumatic tales of accidents, as well as the need for us to use data properly, to data-mine why accidents happen, and to use that information to further road safety. I do not think that anyone disagrees with him. The hon. Member for Poplar and Limehouse (Jim Fitzpatrick) wants us to think about road safety, and to consider 20 mph zones as well as looking at the reduction in the number of traffic police that has led to other accidents. The hon. Member for Stirling (Stephen Kerr) commended his local police and road safety people on their “Safe Drive Stay Alive” campaign. He touched us all when he spoke about foreign drivers and how there is no way to enforce the bans imposed by Scottish sheriffs. That is a tragedy.

The hon. Member for Stroud (Dr Drew) spoke about local speeding issues and data from local cameras. I cannot go into the technicalities of English law, but anything that helps to increase road safety should be used, and it is the duty of all Members of the House to ensure that roads in their constituencies are as safe as possible. The hon. Member for St Ives (Derek Thomas) spoke about country roads and made an important point about the A30. I will try to get through my remarks quickly, because there is a lot for the Minister to answer.

The hon. Member for Strangford (Jim Shannon) gave a comprehensive overview of road safety in Northern Ireland, and he spoke about the education of young drivers and how graphic illustrations really help. The hon. Member for Brentford and Isleworth (Ruth Cadbury) is a real advocate for cycling and walking. She may be surprised to hear that until recently I cycled frequently, but I take on board her views that most people do not cycle because of road safety issues. I only ever cycled on cycle paths, and I thank Sustrans for its work in Scotland and for the number of cycle paths that pass by beautiful places.

It is important to consider amending The Highway Code—that returns to the point about education because we must ensure that people understand those amendments. The hon. Member for Newport East (Jessica Morden) eloquently paid tribute to the Smith family in her constituency and the trust that they have set up. The investigation of such road accidents can only help to improve the lives of people in her constituency and across the UK.

The hon. Member for Ayr, Carrick and Cumnock (Bill Grant) spoke about his more than 30 years’ service in the fire and rescue service, and about the devastation caused by accidents. People who are trapped often require a simple hand hold, which is an immensely powerful thing. I thank him for his service. As he said, the improvements made to motor vehicles by manufacturers are important, but, as we know, vehicles are driven by people and education is the most important thing. The hon. Gentleman mentioned seatbelts, crash helmets and so on, as well as breathalysers. Drink-driving is still rising in the UK, but I am glad that things are improving in Scotland, because of the actions of the Scottish Government. I think those were all the Members who spoke, so I will briefly do some quick headlines.

I want the Minister to consider the Scottish Government examples that I will give him. Scotland’s road safety framework to 2020 has produced really good results, with cuts in the numbers of accidents. Things that the Scottish Government have done include cutting the blood alcohol limit, and we must take on board the fact
that the limit has been reduced from 80 mg to 50 mg, which is lower than for the rest of the UK. We really must look at, and I would like the Minister to think about, the 7.6% reduction in drink-driving as a result of that.

The Scottish Government are also looking at drug-driving limits—I commend that idea to the Minister—and they are going to introduce roadside testing. They have considered where they can make prosecutions for different types of drug, specifying the limit for each and testing against that. Importantly, they also want to ensure that it is not just people who are driving in an impaired manner—zig-zagging across the road—who can be stopped by the police.

Mrs Madeleine Moon (in the Chair): Order. I did not want to interrupt the hon. Lady, but she has gone past her allotted five minutes. If we are to hear from the Minister—

Marion Fellows: I did not realise I had five minutes to sum up—my apologies, Mrs Moon.

Mrs Madeleine Moon (in the Chair): My apologies for interrupting.

3.41 pm Karl Turner (Kingston upon Hull East) (Lab): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Mrs Moon. I pay tribute to the hon. Member for Stoke-on-Trent South (Jack Brereton) for securing this important and timely debate. He is clearly very committed to making roads safer in his constituency and he speaks with great knowledge of the subject.

The Government recently published their 2017 figures for reported road casualties in Great Britain, after a lengthy delay. Although there are some positives in that latest statistical release, there is also cause for concern. The Minister told me earlier this year that the picture was mixed, and it remains so. We have heard from hon. Members on both sides of the House about this country’s proud record. We have some of the safest roads in the world. In fact, we have the fourth lowest number of road deaths per million inhabitants, behind Norway, Sweden and Switzerland. However, we must never think that that means the job is done, while thousands of people are killed and seriously injured every year, many of which were life-changing. The Government scrapped road targets that successfully reduced the number of people killed or seriously injured by a third under the Labour Government. The Government say that targets do not achieve anything, but I disagree. They focus minds and attention, and hold the Government to account. Currently, there are no targets with which to assess progress. The Government set themselves targets to meet in pretty much every other area of policy, but not for reducing road deaths and injuries. Why is that the case?

We have heard about the safer road fund, and we welcomed that targeted approach to enabling local authorities to improve the most dangerous stretches of A roads in England. The fund initially totalled £175 million, of which £100 million is currently invested. However, the other £75 million that was originally allocated has, according to the Minister, “not been required”. Will he clarify what that is about? We saw this morning that the RAC Foundation and the Road Safety Foundation have published a report on the possible benefits of the safer road fund, which estimates that the fund could prevent almost 1,450 deaths and serious injuries over the next two decades on the riskiest A roads of England. We are crying out for investment in road safety, so why is that money not being spent and where is it being reallocated to?

We are also concerned about enforcement. Traffic officers have seen a 24% fall in their numbers since 2012—a point raised by my hon. Friend the Member for Poplar and Limehouse (Jim Fitzpatrick). In 2010, there were 3,500 police officers patrolling the UK’s roads, but by 2017 the figure had fallen to 2,600. It seems that cuts to our vital services are putting safety at risk.

The latest road safety figures show that there has been an increase in the number of pedestrian and motorcyclist fatalities as well. The number of cyclists killed has remained broadly constant since 2010: why has progress stalled in that area as well? I would be grateful if, in the time he has available, the Minister could answer some of the points raised by the Front-Bench spokespeople as well as by hon. Members on both sides of the House.

3.46 pm The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Transport (Jesse Norman): I thank you, Mrs Moon, and I thank all colleagues across the House for the very interesting and wide-ranging debate this afternoon.

Far from not being held to account, I think this is the third road safety debate I have done in recent months, and it speaks to the vigour of our democracy that Ministers can be held to account on this important issue. I pay particular tribute to my hon. Friend the Member for Stoke-on-Trent South (Jack Brereton) who has done excellent work on the Transport Committee. He knows from that, and from his work before entering Parliament, that this country has what was described by my hon. Friend the Member for Kingston upon Hull East (Karl Turner)—perhaps I should not refer to him as my hon. Friend, but he is—as a “proud record” in road safety improvements, and that is rightly recognised.
An interesting example is a case I have officials looking at, which is the recent concerns about seatbelts and the proportion of accidents in which failure to wear a seatbelt has been a contributing cause. That has rightly been touched on in the debate. It is sometimes important to remember that seatbelt use is observed by 98.2% of car drivers in England and Scotland, which is one small indication of how attitudes and practices have changed over time. Although the number of fatalities has levelled out recently, as has been said, we should be very proud that that number fell over a consistent period and is significantly lower now than it was even 10 years ago. However, it is important to say that I recognise, as do the Government, the billions of pounds in economic costs alone of road casualties, and that is not to say anything of the human costs. Three dreadful stories of death on our roads have been mentioned in the debate, and I hope to have the chance to touch on those.

If I may, I will briefly rehearse the current state of play from the Government’s standpoint and then come to the many interesting questions that colleagues have raised. As colleagues will know, in 2015 my predecessor announced an overarching strategy known as the road safety statement, and I think the evidence is clear that we have made very good headway in many areas. However, we absolutely recognise that there is more work to do. I am glad that the hon. Member for Kingston upon Hull East has mentioned the RAC Foundation’s report into the effect of the investment that was made in safer roads.

That £100 million was bid for by 50 local authorities, and it was allocated to them. I am sure we will return to that subject over time, but it is worth saying that as the report shows, that money is projected to have a very positive effect on reducing casualties and deaths, and—purely in economic terms—a high cost-benefit ratio, as one might expect. That in itself is worth mentioning.

However, as an indication that the Government are not in any sense letting the grass grow under our feet, we announced in June a two-year action plan to address four specific priority groups within the overall road safety statement, as part of a refresh of that statement. The first group is motorcyclists, and the second is rural road users, who have been mentioned; I think the hon. Member for Stroud (Dr Drew) rightly picked up the issue of rural roads. The third group is older and more vulnerable users—the hon. Member for Birmingham, Erdington (Jack Dromey) mentioned elderly drivers and the effects posed by them—and the fourth is young road users, who are disproportionately implicated in killed and seriously injured statistics.

We are also trialling many new and different approaches to try to get at the root of what is clearly a hard problem. That is why earlier this year, the Prime Minister announced a £480,000 partnership between the police and the RAC Foundation to trial the new approach to investigating road collisions, along the lines of the road collision investigation branch mentioned by the hon. Member for Newport East (Jessica Morden). It is also important to note the £350,000 competition run by PACTS to provide police forces with the next generation of mobile breathalyser equipment. If that is being adopted in Scotland as well, we can be delighted, because that is a source of improvement.

The hon. Member for Brentford and Isleworth (Ruth Cadbury) suggested that somehow, the Government were only targeting cyclists with our latest announcement about the review of cycling road offences. First of all, that is clearly not true, although there are specific concerns about potential risks and harm posed by cyclists, which Laura Thomas mentioned in her report and have existed among the judiciary and the legal fraternity for a long time. That harm is not large in numerical terms—it is very small compared to the number of cyclists killed by drivers—but it is undoubtedly worth noting as we evolve a wider ecology of road use. We have taken measures to address drivers specifically, including doubling the penalty for the use of mobile phones to six points and a £200 fine, and targeting drink and drug driving. Drug driving is a particular menace, killing some 200 people a year, and we have targeted it through a new regime of roadside swab testing, which has proven to be a fast and efficient means of identifying drug drivers.

Of course, some things are best handled not just through regulation, but through other, softer interventions. I was pleased to note that the national speed awareness course is having a real effect, and it is worth mentioning that reducing speed re-offending than fines and penalty points, according to a recent evaluation over a period of three years following the initial offer to attend. The Government are also thinking about interventions to support new drivers. A range of measures is being trialled, but legislation is now in force that allows learners on to motorways when accompanied by an approved driving instructor, so they do not have that cliff-edge experience of going from driving on local roads to driving on fast-flowing motorways.

My hon. Friend the Member for Stoke-on-Trent South rightly mentioned the safer roads fund. He will be aware that in Shropshire, not far from his constituency, there is the A529 between Hinstock and Market Drayton, which has the unhappy accolade of being the most dangerous road in that part of the UK, according to analysis carried out by the Road Safety Foundation in 2014. That is just one of the areas that has been targeted with nearly £4 million through the fund. Of course, Stoke-on-Trent City Council should be congratulated on the work it has been doing on investing in road and pavement maintenance, re-allocating bus lanes, upgrading traffic signals, and the like.

I mentioned that the two-year action plan focuses in particular on young people, rural road users, motorcyclists, and older people—not just the damage that older people might do to themselves, but the hazard they pose to others. It was my very unhappy duty to meet with the hon. Member for Birmingham, Erdington, and the Clarke family to discuss the awful situation of Poppy-Abella. I remember it extremely well, and I hope that Rachel and Phil were glad of the opportunity to talk about their situation and the experience that they had. It is important to say that optometrists already have a duty of care to check eyesight, and at the moment there is not any evidence that a compulsory, formal duty to assess eyesight would have a marked positive effect. However, that is one of the things that we are trying to cover—if not directly now, then as part of a future flow of work—through the two-year action plan.

The issue of cyclists was mentioned by the hon. Member for Brentford and Isleworth. She will understand that a formal response to the safety review consultation
is coming, and a formal action plan, I hope, will follow later in the year. There is some further work to be done on road safety that I hope to announce before too long, so there is a pattern of things under way. I cannot always anticipate things that are going to be made public in formal statements after proper agreement across Government, but she recognises—as does my hon. Friend the Member for Stoke-on-Trent South—that there must be, and is, a hierarchy of road use, and that cars do enormous damage to vulnerable road users of every kind, not just cyclists. That is the fitting counterpart to the work we have been doing through the Thomas report, and of course, the killed and seriously injured statistics show that cars are much more dangerous.

The Cycling and Walking Investment Strategy safety review has had an enormous response. Something like 13,000 responses have been received; a lot have come through formal write-in programmes, but many have come from ordinary cyclists and members of the public, and rightly so. One of the things that has come out of that, on which the Government have done a lot of work, has been the work of the West Midlands police on close passing. We have already announced some further work on that, and I expect that to continue.

The PACTS report is the original instigator of some of this debate. I congratulate PACTS on the work it has done, and I thank Ageas for its work as well. I welcome the work on the indicators that are being used. The Government are already very engaged with what might be considered the “safe systems” approach. We have thought about that in the context of cycling and walking, but we are trying to balance that with specific evidence of places where one needs to be able to address actual harm inflicted. The response cannot just be about predictive anticipation of where there may be collisions. It also has to be about showing a local community that a collision has been addressed; an accident has met with a response; and a concern has in some sense been understood, recognised and salved, if not solved. It is important to recognise that we adopt that approach within Government, and we do so seriously.

I have constantly gone round the houses on the issue of targets with my great friend the hon. Member for Poplar and Limehouse (Jim Fitzpatrick)—a brilliant fireman, and, I have no doubt, a great campaigner in this area—and with others. As the hon. Member for Kingston upon Hull East mentioned, there are countries with targets that have better safety records than ours, but there are also countries with targets that do not have better safety records than ours. The matter is not absolutely clear by any means, and we will continue to discuss it over time.

On 20-mile-an-hour zones, I remind colleagues that local authorities are fully free to use a range of traffic-calming measures, including all-day limits or partial limits. I am very sympathetic to my hon. Friend the Member for Stirling (Stephen Kerr) regarding the situation of Mrs Billett, as he will know. We have all kinds of flags at ports, and we have bollards and interventions on roads, but he is absolutely right to flag that issue. Finally, my hon. Friend the Member for St Ives (Derek Thomas) is absolutely right to pick up the point about agricultural vehicles, and I will be writing to him separately on the topic of the A30. RIS 2 will be announced in the middle of next year.

I had better sit down. Mrs Moon, you have been a brilliant Chair. Thank you so much.

3.59 pm

Jack Brereton: I thank all Members who have contributed to this wide-ranging and interesting debate, and I am particularly grateful for the heartfelt speeches that some colleagues have made. As the hon. Member for Birmingham, Erdington (Jack Dromey) will notice, I now wear glasses. I have recently had my eyes checked, and I did not wear glasses previously, but I do now. I am sure that he will be happy to know that my eyesight is now much better.

I thank the Minister for his comprehensive remarks on a number of the points that were raised throughout the debate. I hope the debate has raised awareness, and I particularly thank Ageas and PACTS for the work they have done. I also remind Members of the report produced by the Road Safety Foundation, which is due to be released on 30 October.

Question put and agreed to.

Resolved,

That this House has considered road safety.
Housing and Home Ownership

[Mark Pritchard in the Chair]

4 pm

Neil O’Brien (Harborough) (Con): I beg to move, That this House has considered housing and home ownership.

It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Mr Pritchard. I recently published an 80-page report for the think-tank Onward. Members will be relieved to hear that I do not intend to read it out today, but I want to talk about some of the themes in it.

This is a short debate, so I want to ask the Minister just two questions. First, will he update us on his thoughts about how we can increase home ownership by rebalancing things between the private rented sector and home ownership? Building more homes is a necessary, but not sufficient, condition of reversing the decline in home ownership. Over the past decade, the private sector has built about 165,000 extra houses every year, but home ownership fell because the private rented sector has expanded by 195,000 homes every year. Multiple property ownership has been squeezing out home ownership for individuals. Private landlords are not doing anything wrong, but we have to ask ourselves as a country whether we want so much of our housing stock to flow into renting, rather than owning.

To rebalance things back towards ownership, we could do a number of things. We could introduce a capital gains tax break for those who want to sell their rented property to their existing tenants. For future rented properties, we could change the tax treatment to encourage people to put their investments into stocks, shares and businesses, rather than just into bidding up the price of housing. Rebalancing in that way could make a big difference. To give a sense of the magnitude, I should say that if we had kept the ratio of privately owned to privately rented homes the same between 2000 and 2015, 2.2 million more homes would be in ownership. That would make a huge difference—at least as big a difference as we could make by increasing the rate at which we build homes.

We know that tax can be effective. The changes brought in by the then Chancellor in 2015 saw the first substantial increase in home ownership for a decade in the following year. I hope that the Minister and his colleagues at the Treasury are thinking about ownership. If we only think about the supply side of the market in challenging the housing problem, we are effectively fighting with one hand tied behind our backs.

The second thing I would like the Minister to update us on is his and the Government’s overall vision for what, where and how we build. The ultimate constraint on how much we build is public consent. If we want to build more, we need to tackle the underlying reasons why people oppose so much of what is built today. For me, there are three underlying reasons. First, too often we build in the wrong places and we lose the green spaces that people value the most. Secondly, we build without the required infrastructure. Thirdly, there are too few benefits for existing residents.

How can we solve those problems? That requires different things in different places. It means building more in the centres of our great cities—densifying them and regenerating more land. Outside our cities, it means more stand-alone, planned new communities and fewer tucked-on developments stuck on the edges of all our existing villages and towns. Everywhere, it means sharing more of the benefits of development with existing residents so that they can see those benefits.

Let me unpack that a little bit. There is lots of room in our great cities for growth. Glasgow, Newcastle, Liverpool, Middlesbrough, Sunderland, Hull and Dundee all had a smaller population in 2016 than they did in 1981. Other cities such as Manchester and Birmingham were only about 6% bigger. There is lots of room to grow in our great cities, and there are lots of reasons to densify the centres of those cities: it is greener; it means less congestion; it means more people walk to work, which in turn is healthier; and infrastructure costs are lower. There are lots of ways to make it happen. To put ideas in the Minister’s head, we could change objectively assessed need to favour inner-city development, to take into account the potential for cities to densify. We could further liberalise building upwards and amend change of use to allow empty shops to be turned into homes.

We could devolve further powers over transport beyond the mayoral combined authority areas. Mayoral authorities such as in London have powers over public transport and the buses. That means they could have denser development, because they can ensure good public transport to it. We could review sightlines in London and build upwards. We could do what the think-tank Create Streets recommends and review regulations so that we can once again build those tall, dense terraces that are so beloved by the population. We can do a lot more in our cities, but we will continue to want to build outside our cities, including in rural areas.

Tulip Siddiq (Hampstead and Kilburn) (Lab): I thank the hon. Gentleman for bringing this debate to the House. His suggestions are good. Does he think that housing provision for people with disabilities should be improved as well? At a sitting of the Select Committee of which I am a member last week, I argued that the Government should implement approved document M4(2). It sounds a bit wordy, but that is about making new homes accessible and adaptable by default. Does he agree with doing that? That measure includes provisions for a wheelchair standard for new homes.

Neil O’Brien: The hon. Lady has a very interesting idea, but I am not familiar with that measure. I will have to go away and look at it.

Outside of the cities, we generally build right up to existing developments. I see that in my constituency.

Jack Lopresti (Filton and Bradley Stoke) (Con): I thank my hon. Friend for giving way and bringing this crucial debate to the House. Does he agree that unless we radically reform our local planning system, we will never get the planning applications through and the houses built that we need? We need to build in huge numbers—more than the Government are proposing at the moment.

Neil O’Brien: I utterly agree; I was about to make that very point. At the moment, we infill bits on the edges of every village and town. We are effectively building in the places that annoy people the most, so we
do not build enough homes, as my hon. Friend said. When we do that, we cannot keep up with the infrastructure needs of these places, because it is physically impossible. Perhaps the primary school is on too small a plot or we cannot widen a road that has become a rat run because there is not enough money to meet infrastructure needs.

Previously, we did things very differently. There was the new towns programme; those new towns now house more than 2 million people very successfully. They are fast-growing places. Mrs Thatcher created docklands in London and Liverpool, and the model was roughly the same for both. A development corporation would buy land cheap at existing low values. It would assemble the land, install the infrastructure and sell on that land for uplifted values, therefore paying for itself. That model has been used successfully all over the world.

Priti Patel (Witham) (Con): I congratulate my hon. Friend who, as ever, is making a very persuasive case. His Onwards report is very good, and he is contributing to what I would call the battle of ideas. He mentioned Margaret Thatcher, who was at the forefront of that. The Centre for Policy Studies published a paper on “help to own” on Monday. We want to be in this space to address some of the big challenges we are facing on planning, taxation and infrastructure, but we also need to try to persuade other parts of the Government—including the Treasury and our dear colleague in the Ministry of Housing, Communities and Local Government—to address some of the bigger issues of intergenerational fairness. A whole generation is locked out of home ownership, and we want to help them get back on the ladder so that we can become that property-owning democracy again.

Neil O’Brien: My right hon. Friend makes an extremely profound and important point.

A lot of councils are now getting back into the business of building new places. They are being forced to, because if they do not want to mess up every village and town in their area, they need to build new stand-alone places. We need to ensure that they have the tools and expertise they need to make that work.

Scott Mann (North Cornwall) (Con): My hon. Friend has brought a very important debate to the House. When we build around existing settlements, we tend to have inflated land values before things have even started. Having new settlements will allow us to capture some of that value to provide some of the infrastructure. Does he agree?

Neil O’Brien: My hon. Friend is absolutely right. I agree in the strongest possible terms, and will come to that point in a second.

Where there have been good new planned settlements, such as Poundbury or Nansledan, they have often been because of a visionary landowner in the area, but we cannot always rely on that. Sometimes, other good ideas have gone wrong because developers have wiggled out of their commitments or planners have failed to get control over the land. How do we make sure that we always build good new places? I would love to see Homes England become a supporting masterplanner for local authorities. I would love us to build on the housing infrastructure fund, which is a brilliant initiative. I would love more central encouragement, which is already coming from the Minister, for good vernacular design.

As ever, the other thing we need is money. That brings me to the third of the reasons why people oppose development—because there is not enough benefit for existing residents. As my hon. Friend the Member for North Cornwall (Scott Mann) mentioned, when planning permission is granted, there is typically a big increase in the value of land, but too little of that flows to existing residents. The Centre for Progressive Policy estimates only about a quarter of the value goes to the local community.

Andrew Lewer (Northampton South) (Con): My hon. Friend mentioned money. Many of the councillors in Northampton welcomed the lifting of the borrowing cap on the housing revenue account. Does he share my hope—that reflects the comments made by my right hon. Friend the Member for Witham (Priti Patel)—that that will be used for shared ownership or owned properties, as well as just for social housing?

Neil O’Brien: I do. That is perhaps for the Minister to answer rather than me, but I absolutely agree that it would be a good thing to do with the extra borrowing power.

How do we capture more of the benefit for the community? We could reform section 106 and the community infrastructure levy and take off the various limits that apply. We could create transparency by creating a register of all land options so that we know what people are paying for land and we stop viability being used as an excuse not to pay for vital infrastructure. We could change the national planning policy framework so that sites do not get put through the strategic housing land availability assessment unless they can pay for their own infrastructure. We could give local authorities the fiscal firepower to assemble land and be their own developers and masterplanners. We could reform land compensation and the Land Compensation Act 1961 to reverse the changes made by unelected judges in the 1970s. A group of organisations, including Shelter, Onward and the Campaign to Protect Rural England, recently came together to call for just that.

As well as more benefits for the local community generally, we also need to see more specific benefit for those most affected by development—those who are right next to it. What about offering cheap homes for sale to the neighbours of new construction sites? At the moment, there is too little other than disruption for the neighbours. In Farndon Fields in my constituency, a developer refused to route construction traffic through neighbouring fields and has instead insisted, using the viability argument, on forcing them down tiny suburban streets. My constituents now have to put up with huge HGVs going down these tiny streets where their children are playing, for several years. No wonder we oppose so much development, when it happens like that. No wonder we do not build enough homes. We have a system that seems geared to maximise opposition.

The only way to build more homes is to deal with the underlying reasons why we oppose so much development today. Those problems can be fixed, and I know our
The revised NPPF requires local authorities to set clearer policy requirements for infrastructure and affordable housing through plans, informed by more transparent viability assessments. It will also support local authorities to ensure that development meets the policy requirements set out in the local plan.

Fundamentally, what we are trying to do in the NPPF is to give clarity up front to developers and local communities about what will be expected, which will allow them to factor that into land value over time. My hon. Friend quite rightly expressed dissatisfaction with the amount of value that is captured from land. He is also concerned about getting the numbers up; it is about building quality, innovative places that people are happy to call home.

Priti Patel: The Minister has hit the blue touch paper in mentioning garden communities. He will know from my correspondence with his Department that one of those schemes—where public funds are being used—to support the concept of garden communities?

Kit Malthouse: The primary requirement we have for garden communities is that they have strong local support and are supported by local democratically elected politicians. We would, for example, not countenance a proposal for a garden community that came forward against the wishes of the local authority or local authorities concerned. My right hon. Friend may have noticed —this points to an issue that my hon. Friend the Member for Harborough raised about capacity and capability—that we recently changed the regulations so that we can have locally-led development corporations. They are brought together from the local planning system, have development corporations. They are brought together and are supported by local democratically elected politicians.

Another issue that has been raised is increasing density, which we believe is also important. We need to make sure that we make the most effective use of underutilised...
land. That is a crucial part of our focus. Higher density development and the development of brownfield land can play a significant role in increasing housing supply in urban locations, especially in areas that are well served by public transport and in town and city centre locations. The revised NPPF requires local planning authorities to be more proactive in identifying opportunities to make more effective use of land. That includes planning for higher densities in locations that are well served by public transport, and reallocating underutilised land to serve local development needs better.

I disagree slightly with my hon. Friend the Member for Harborough about the requirement to build towers to achieve density. In central London—a place that I know very well, having served there as a London Assembly member and councillor—some of the densest areas are in fact some of the most desirable, and they are low-rise. It is probably still the case that the densest part of central London is Cadogan Square. Towers do not necessarily deliver density, and they can often be intrusive. Our framework goes further by stating that local authorities should support the use of airspace above existing residential and commercial buildings to provide new homes, as my hon. Friend said. We recognise that there is more to be done, and that is why we have just announced that we will publish proposals for a national permitted development right to permit people to build upwards on existing buildings rather than just to build out.

Important in all of this is the need to diversify the market. We believe that to increase our housing supply we have to be innovative and boost the development sector to allow both large and small builders to flourish and to build the homes that our communities need. The Government fully recognise the important role that small and medium-sized house builders play in delivering much-needed housing in this country, and we are committed to ensuring that this support is in the right place. We have already put in place a number of initiatives to help SME house builders to grow and develop, including the home building fund, the housing growth fund and the housing delivery fund, as well as proposals to make it easier for SMEs to identify land.

We believe that that is a critical way to encourage innovation. The market has agglomerated into a small number of large players, which are perhaps not as innovative as they could be. If we can create a more vigorous market of people competing to build houses and competing for our custom, they are likely to be much more innovative in their method, supply and typography of housing, and they may well cater to different parts of the market and look at sites that larger builders might not.

Scott Mann: My hon. Friend is doing a cracking job, especially with his “more, better, faster” campaign on housing delivery. My point is about self-build—he has not mentioned it specifically, but I know that it is part of the Government’s strategy on delivery. Does he agree with the sentiment that there is no better help that we can give to an individual than to allocate them a plot and allow them to build their own home?

Kit Malthouse: I wholeheartedly agree on self-build, which I am very keen to encourage. Something like three out of every four houses in Austria are self-built or custom-built. It holds enormous capacity for the future. I recommend that my hon. Friend go and visit a site called Graven Hill just outside Bicester, which is the largest self-build site in Europe and which will deliver about 1,400 self-build homes. It is quite something to see—an amazing array of different houses. There is a house that looks like a stealth bomber sitting next to a Swiss chalet, a Cotswold cottage and a flat-pack house from Poland. As I said on the fringes of conference, I think the site will be a conservation area in the future because of the effervescence of design that is taking place there. We are very keen to encourage self-build.

Finally, one of the big issues—

Eddie Hughes (Walsall North) (Con): Will my hon. Friend give way?

Kit Malthouse: Yes, I will give way.

Eddie Hughes: I was scared by my hon. Friend’s use of the word “finally” and thought that I might not have the opportunity to intervene before he finished. As an accidental landlord myself—I need to refer to my declaration of interest—I was intrigued by the report on a proposed “help to own” scheme published by the Centre for Policy Studies on Monday. I understand that the Minister has been sent a copy. The idea that landlords might be able to sell a property to a sitting tenant, and that there would be a capital gains tax break for both parties, seemed innovative and interesting. Does he have any thoughts on that?

Kit Malthouse: By sheer coincidence, on my accession to the chrysanthemum throne in housing, I raised a similar possibility, should we look at some way of transferring from landlord to tenant in the future. Those issues of tax, stamp duty and ownership are way above my pay grade, but I have no doubt that the report will have winged its way to the Treasury, where our colleagues will be considering its efficacy. I can see why it might be attractive from a landlord transfer to ownership point of view, although we would have to study its fiscal effects to see what the cost might be.

Priti Patel: Will my hon. Friend give way?

Kit Malthouse: I will make a bit of progress. I want to address the issue of home ownership, because it is fundamental to the report and it is, as my hon. Friend the Member for Harborough quite rightly said, one of the most important challenges of our time. As he mentioned, we must find ways to improve home ownership. Rising demand for housing has increased prices and in many cases pushed down home ownership. The Government believe that people should be free to purchase a second home or invest in a buy-to-let property. However, we are aware that that can make it difficult for other people, particularly first-time buyers, to get on the property ladder. That is why in April 2016 the Government introduced higher rates of stamp duty land tax on purchases of additional properties.

Since the council tax empty homes premium was introduced in April 2013, the number of long-term empty residential properties has fallen. When it is in force, the Rating (Property in Common Occupation) and Council Tax (Empty Dwellings) Bill will allow
councils to go further, increasing the premium by up to 300% in some cases. That will allow authorities to encourage better use of the existing housing stock in their area. As the Prime Minister announced, the Government are also taking action on non-resident purchases of residential property, which can make it more difficult for UK residents to purchase a home of their own. The Government will publish a consultation on introducing an increased stamp duty land tax charge on non-residents buying property in England and Northern Ireland. More details will be brought forward through that consultation in due course, following the normal tax policy-making process set out by the Government—the legislation will be in a future Finance Bill.

We must also support our younger generation, who find it increasingly hard to get on to the property ladder. We are supporting people's aspirations to buy through a range of initiatives, including Help to Buy, right to buy, greater funding for shared ownership, and rent to buy. Since the spring of 2010, Government-backed schemes have helped more than 481,000 households to buy a home. Younger people are also helped directly by our investment in affordable housing. The Government are investing more than £9 billion in the affordable homes programme to deliver a wide range of affordable homes, including shared ownership homes, by 2022. Since 2010, we have delivered more than 60,000 shared ownership properties, helping people to take their first steps into home ownership. Our recent Green Paper, “A new deal for social housing”, announced that we would be exploring innovative, affordable home ownership models to support those who are struggling to raise a deposit.

The Prime Minister has made it clear that this should be a country that works for everyone. That means building more of the right homes in the right places and ensuring that the housing market works for all parts of our community. It is this Government’s mission to reverse the decline in home ownership and to revive the dream of Britain as a property-owning democracy. We must revive that dream for ordinary people—for those striving on low and middle incomes, who find the first rung of the housing ladder beyond their reach. The Government are committed to tackling this challenge to make the housing market work. By the mid-2020s, we aim to have increased house building to an average of 300,000 net new homes a year.

On planning permissions, which my hon. Friend the Member for Filton and Bradley Stoke (Jack Lopresti) mentioned, we are now granting more than 350,000 permissions a year against a building target of 300,000 houses. That is another challenge that I face. In the time that I have in this job, I am always open to ideas. I certainly welcome the radical thinking that my hon. Friend the Member for Harborough and his collaborators on the paper have injected into the debate. I will be studying the paper in some detail and I hope to weave some of his thinking into our policies in the future.

Question put and agreed to.

4.28 pm
Sitting suspended.

4.30 pm
Karen Lee (Lincoln) (Lab): I beg to move,

That this House has considered the closures of RAF Scampton and RAF Linton-on-Ouse.

It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Mr Pritchard. I am pleased to lead this debate on a vital national and local issue—the closures of RAF Scampton and RAF Linton-on-Ouse. I will focus on Scampton, as its closure has a major impact on my constituency, but other hon. Members may wish to give a more informed assessment of the closure of RAF Linton. I apologise in advance that I will not take too many interventions, but I have quite a lot to raise before I open the debate to other hon. Members.

I am pleased to say that I have a huge amount of local support in opposing Scampton’s closure. I have the backing of the Historic Lincoln Trust, which is chaired by Lord Cormack, and I have collected more than 5,000 signatures for my petition opposing the closure. Other local groups have collected signatures on petitions, and added to the signatures I have collected, that amounts to a huge public outcry against the decision.

There is a lot of local anger in Lincoln at the Ministry of Defence’s decision. There is real concern about the future of the Red Arrows in Lincolnshire and the potential loss of many local jobs. Since the decision, I have campaigned rigorously and gathered local momentum against it. This is one of the best-supported campaigns I have ever been involved in. People have signed my petition, regardless of their age or political persuasion. Never before have I had members of the public queuing down the high street to sign a petition about which they feel such passion. So far, it has reached 5,000 signatures. We are calling, first, for the Red Arrows to stay in Lincolnshire—that is an absolute must—secondly, for the rationale behind the closure and the impact it will have on the UK’s defences to be made public, which I have tried to do; thirdly, for a thorough consultation to be undertaken with all local and national stakeholders; and, finally, for a full impact assessment of the effect that the closure will have on the local economy and workers.

This year, we are celebrating 100 years of the Royal Air Force and 100 years since Air Station Brattleby Cliff was renamed RAF Scampton. The airbase is central to Lincolnshire’s past and present identity. Scampton was home to the legendary Dambusters, and since 2000 it has housed the world-renowned Red Arrows. For 100 years, Scampton has symbolised our Royal Air Force’s proud history, and it has received a lot of praise for its role. Recently, Air Marshal Sir Michael Graydon referred to it as a “very good base”, and the strategic defence review conducted in 2010 concluded that keeping the Red Arrows at Scampton was the best way to allow them to operate. However, the Ministry of Defence ploughed on and announced that RAF Scampton was to be closed and sold off. Although the MOD made the decision, it is ultimately Government cuts that forced that step to be taken. If budgets are cut, our communities suffer. Cuts have consequences.
Mrs Anne-Marie Trevelyan (Berwick-upon-Tweed) (Con): Will the hon. Lady give way?

Karen Lee: I will not, I am sorry. I want to go on, because I am aware that we will have votes in the House.

Locally, in bomber county, there is incredulity that the Conservatives are effectively signing the death warrant of our local RAF base and taking away our Red Arrows, especially as, like Labour Members, only a very short time ago they welcomed the RAF to London and enjoyed the fly-past by the wonderful historic planes. The decision to close RAF Scampton has been very badly managed. There has not been a local transparent consultation. Although I am the local MP, I was not informed; I found out through the local and national press coverage when I turned on BBC news in the morning.

Although the Ministry of Defence statement asserted that it would engage with local stakeholders, that has been far from the reality. I have submitted a letter requesting a meeting and a freedom of information request. I acknowledge that this is a sensitive subject, but I submitted my FOI request on 30 July—78 days, or 11 weeks, ago—and, other than two holding replies, I have not had a proper response. The last thing I want to do is publish anything that would put our country’s safety at risk, but my request relates to my petition and to the effect that the closure will have on the surrounding area and the future of the Red Arrows. Rather than withhold the information for an extended length of time, the MOD should publish the impact assessments that informed the decision for the public to see.

From the information available to me locally, I feel confident in saying that the decision is highly flawed. The Minister noted in the initial announcement that “The disposal of the site would offer better value for money and, crucially, better military capability by relocating the units based there.”

I cannot comment on military capability, as I am not privy to the details, but I dispute the idea that it was an effective “value for money” decision.

The argument for closing RAF Scampton is that the land can be sold and used for housing. That case has been proposed twice before—in 1994 and 2000. On both occasions, the financial case was flawed. The value of the land, particularly the assumed capital receipt and the expected value of the land per hectare, was overestimated. The previous decisions, and most likely this one, were based on an unrealistic view of land values. Other MOD site disposals were used as comparisons, but variations across the country were not considered. On that basis, I asked the Minister to release the forecast pricing of the land, as it has been miscalculated twice previously.

The land in question is also very likely contaminated, and any decision must take into account the cost of land remediation to ensure that it is of the necessary standard for residential development. I have been advised locally that there is an extensive underground fuel system, which is likely to have leaked over the years, leading to hydrocarbon contamination, so a major clean-up would be required before the land could be considered suitable for residential use. The environmental factors, alongside the cost of removing RAF infrastructure, may reduce the value of the land and result in a loss if it were sold.

Will the Minister explain in detail the expected savings from closing Scampton, factoring in the cost of remediation work?

It is not just the cost of the land that means that Scampton should not be closed: It is what it and the Red Arrows provide to the local economy. Not only does Scampton provide 600 jobs, which enables spending in Lincoln and thus increases productivity in the local economy—we hear a lot from the Conservative Government about jobs—but Lincolnshire has a rich military history, and Scampton epitomises that and attracts tourists. I work closely with Visit Lincoln, which has stressed to me on numerous occasions the importance of the base and the Red Arrows. The heritage centre at Scampton is housed in one of the original world war two hangars. It holds more than 1,000 artefacts and contains the original office of Guy Gibson, commanding officer of 617 Squadron—the Dambusters. The Red Arrows are world renowned. Even though they tour the world, between November and March the public can visit them at Scampton. It is an exciting opportunity to visit the impressive Arrows up close. Aviation enthusiasts travel across the UK and from abroad to visit Scampton, but possibly not for much longer.

The selling of Scampton not only deprives the local economy and costs us jobs but wipes out the history of those who bravely fought against the fascist threat during world war two. Did the Minister and the Ministry of Defence consider the effect that the closure would have on the local economy when they decided to close Scampton and relocate the Arrows? Has the Ministry of Defence honestly given any consideration to the future of the heritage centre?

The leader of the Labour party has committed to save Scampton—I went straight up and bent his ear, and he agreed to that. He recognises its immense local and national significance, but the Prime Minister continues with an unpopular, short-sighted and misinformed policy. I have had more requests about this issue in the 16 months I have been an MP than about anything else—it is so vital locally in Lincoln.

I began this debate by asking the Minister questions about land value and the local economy. I hope that I get some kind of reply, because I have had nothing from the MOD. I would now like to open the debate to other Members.

4.38 pm

Kevin Hollinrake (Thirsk and Malton) (Con): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Mr Pritchard. I thank the hon. Member for Lincoln (Karen Lee) for securing this very important debate.

In my constituency, I have the historic RAF base of Linton-on-Ouse, and I quite understand that the Minister has a difficult job. No one wants their local base to close. Bases are not just about bricks and mortar, tarmac and concrete. They are places of heroic deeds, great endeavours and often the ultimate sacrifice.

Linton-on-Ouse has a proud history. It was first formed in 1937, in the lead-up to the second world war. The No. 4 Group RAF was based there, and it undertook some heroic bombing raids on Norway, the Netherlands and into Germany. Linton-on-Ouse was also host to the No. 6 Group Royal Canadian Air Force. In some of the pubs in my area there are lots of photos of those days—of Canadian airmen and British aircrew together,
looking valiant and invincible. Of course, many of those people never returned from their bombing raids. Indeed, in 1941, the base at Linton was bombed by the Luftwaffe, with a loss of 13 men, including the station commander. All my life, RAF Linton-on-Ouse has been part of the local community. I remember playing darts in the officers’ mess there as a young man, and I also went to a very extravagant, formal military wedding there. As a young boy, my son Charlie was first shown how to fly a plane on the flight simulator there by a very good friend of ours, Flight Lieutenant Rod Leigh—a great man who is sadly no longer with us.

The announcement that the base would close in 2020 has shocked the entire community because of the part that it has played in people’s lives. It employs many people—as the hon. Member for Lincoln said, these bases employ many people directly—and many people work in the base’s supply chain too. Many jobs will be at risk because of the closure and, of course, the local community is very proud of the base’s historic contribution to our previous fights against tyranny. The Minister has a very difficult job because he is responsible for taxpayer’s money—it is not Government money—and he has got to make sure that all the resources he has are used in the most cost-effective way possible. I understand that maintaining the military estate costs £2.5 billion per annum. The closure of the base at Linton will save £140 million by the end of the decade, and will contribute to a significant investment of £4 billion in our infrastructure and military bases going forward. It is hugely important that our military bases and forces are fit for purpose and can do us proud when they are needed in the future.

Mrs Madeleine Moon (Bridgend) (Lab): I thank the hon. Gentleman for his speech, which is very effective. Does he agree that another of the problems that we face is the need to keep the capacity to flex and to expand our capability in the event of threat? With Russian submarines off our coast, Russian aircraft coming very close to our airspace and ships also coming into our waters, is this not a time when our capacity to expand is central to our defence not only in the future but now?

Kevin Hollinrake: My hon. Friend makes a very good point, which was also made to me by one of the training officers at RAF Linton who is retiring and has no axe to grind. He made exactly the same point about making sure that we have the capacity to train people on the base. I would like the Minister to make sure that we have got that capacity and that the airbase will not be needed, and to consider the points that we have raised. If he decides ultimately that the base will be closed, I ask him to support us in the planning work that we will have to carry out to find the best possible future uses for the base—yes, housing is one potential use, but there would be many employment opportunities. We want to make sure, if the closure goes ahead, that on that sad day, the employment prospects created as a result at least make up for some of the jobs lost in the locality, and that we provide opportunities for local people who have such a long connection with and have relied so much on that base for their community and for jobs both at the base and in the local supply chain.

I know that the Minister will address those points either now or on a later occasion, and I am grateful for the opportunity to speak.

Nic Dakin (Scunthorpe) (Lab): As always, it is a pleasure to see you in the Chair, Mr Pritchard. I congratulate my hon. Friend the Member for Lincoln (Karen Lee) on securing this timely and important debate. It is also a pleasure to follow the hon. Member for Thirsk and Malton (Kevin Hollinrake). Recently, I had the privilege to be on a parliamentary armed forces visit, and I take this opportunity to thank everyone at RAF Linton-on-Ouse for making us so welcome and giving us such an instructive, informative and excellent visit.
I want to focus in particular on RAF Kirton-in-Lindsey, which was closed in 2013. It is in my constituency. There is still an association with RAF Scampton in so far as there are assets in Kirton-in-Lindsey still being used by the Scampton base. The closure of RAF Scampton will have an impact on Kirton-in-Lindsey. Those are the assets that I am concerned about.

I have always found the military personnel—from the RAF and all the armed services—with whom I have come into contact to be excellent, but I found that dealing with the MOD was less than excellent when it was disposing of the site in Kirton-in-Lindsey. The MOD’s attitude of mind is very much focused on disposal and simple numbers. However, the impact on cost is not about simple numbers from a disposal—the hon. Member for Thirsk and Malton touched on this, in some ways—but about community value and community assets.

In Lincolnshire—“bomber county”—as my colleague said—the disposal of assets has a history of being done in a way that has actually cost the public purse. The disposal might have got a little cash for the MOD at the time, but the cost to the public purse has been a lot more, because the disposal was not done effectively: the maintenance and support of often derelict sites has frequently fallen back on other parts of the public purse.

My plea is that the disposals of RAF Linton-on-Ouse and RAF Scampton are done in a way that engages fully with the local community and that looks for full community value, not simple pennies in the pot. That will much better serve the nation and the communities in which the bases have served for such a long while, giving better value for money to the public purse.

I return to Kirton-in-Lindsey, to read from the letter sent to me by the town council. It reminded me:

“Previously Kirton in Lindsey Town Council have submitted requests to North Lincolnshire Council for the registering of the tennis courts, gymnasium and surrounding leisure land off York Road, Kirton in Lindsey, as assets of community value which are now listed as such”—under legislation brought in by the coalition Government, which is rightly being used by communities to benefit community interest. The letter continues:

“The Town Council has also proactively written to the MOD requesting that they consider selling the leisure land at RAF Kirton in Lindsey to the Town Council for the good of the community.”

I very much support the town council. Those are assets of community value that can benefit a significant community—or they can be sold to a slightly higher bidder for a bit of cash that would probably be spent fairly quickly by the Red Arrows and would not have the same community and public benefit of the more intelligent approach.

I hope that the Minister will do everything he can to look at the assets in the Kirton-in-Lindsey base and to ensure that the community interest is explored and delivered to the maximum extent possible. It is interesting that in the disposal of the base, North Lincolnshire Council, which is Conservative controlled—sadly, still Conservative controlled—put in a bid for the base land. I think that the numbers were probably fairly close to those of the successful bidder, but by now the council would have developed the base further than has been done.

Instead, the development of the base has been stalled, typically, although I hope it is now moving forward. With the best will in the world, a private developer, even though developing the base for very good business interests, is not making the same progress that might otherwise have been made. I hope that lessons have been learned to benefit both Linton-on-Ouse and Scampton, and that there is an opportunity to put the community value back into the community through the appropriate disposal of the community value assets that Kirton-in-Lindsey Town Council identified and registered—appropriately—with the Ministry of Defence and with North Lincolnshire Council. That is my plea. I cannot make that plea big enough, because this is a moment in time when the public good can be better delivered. If the opportunity is missed, the future will not benefit.

I cannot finish without mentioning the historic nature of the Scampton site. As everyone knows, it was the host of 617 Squadron, otherwise known as the Dambusters. That is rich within our heritage, and always will be—one of the big emblematic and triumphant missions of the second world war, to which we all owe a huge debt. In the 100th anniversary year of the RAF, it is something that we commemorate and remember. The Red Arrows maintain that historical tradition by flying out of RAF Scampton. Often, when I drive to Newark to catch a train down to London on a Monday morning, I see the Red Arrows above, in the Lincolnshire skies, doing their stuff. It is a sight to be seen—awesome, frankly. I share the feeling of my hon. Friend the Member for Lincoln that it would be appropriate, if the changes go ahead, for the Red Arrows to remain in Lincolnshire, flying across the Lincolnshire skies.

4.55 pm

Mrs Anne-Marie Trevelyan (Berwick-upon-Tweed) (Con): I may be cut off by the Division bell, but many might be grateful for that.

I want to emphasise that this is such an important issue. I am lucky because some of the air traffic control personnel in RAF Scampton at present will move up to RAF Boulmer in my constituency as a result of RAF decisions. The reality is, however, that the one group of people who are not ever able to speak for themselves, and who indeed colleagues have perhaps not mentioned much, is those in the RAF itself. This is very much their decision.

As ever, the RAF is in a state of continuous change and, although this year we have commemorated in extraordinary ways the RAF 100 and the exploits, bravery, and extraordinary and impossible challenges of our incredible airmen and women over the past 100 years, the reality is that those in the RAF look forward. While respecting history, we must allow those who are planning for the future—with technology and aircraft that are out of this world in terms of a normal human’s comprehension—to be in places that necessarily work for the RAF. We must respect the RAF’s decisions.

I completely respect the position of the hon. Member for Lincoln (Karen Lee) on the community, however, and I hope very much that the Minister and the Defence Infrastructure Organisation, which will be charged with finding new uses for the site, are mindful of history and the need to maintain the location whence extraordinary deeds were done.
I am no shrinking violet when it comes to criticising the way the DIO has managed housing challenges: the MOD was set the challenge of finding a huge amount of land to build housing on, as part of the Government's big housing strategy, and I led the Public Accounts Committee's inquiry into how that was going. I continue to say that much more needs to be done. I commend colleagues on encouraging the Minister to ensure that that relationship is stronger than it has been so that communities know the MOD understands the value of a community. This is not just about taking a piece of land and building houses on it.

We must remember that the RAF wants to move forward. It has a budget—everyone has a budget—and it wants its technological abilities to be honed in the right places. The hon. Member for Bridgend (Mrs Moon) mentioned the Russian threat, but the MOD's investment in Lossiemouth, where the P-8 is coming in, will enable it to do so much more. Technology is constantly moving forward, and the RAF wants those centres of excellence and those training and base centres.

Mrs Moon: The point I was making was not about meeting current capability; it was about having the capability to flex and expand. Once we build on an aerodrome, it is gone. We have to have the capacity to keep things operational, so that should the bases be needed, we can make them so.

Mrs Trevelyan: I entirely agree. During the second world war, we built hundreds of airfields in a hurry, so that we could move those brave young men in and out of the country to defend our shores, but they have not been used since. We always have to look forward. The reality is that we have no idea what the future warfare space might look like. The RAF is telling us constantly that it wants those centres of excellence where it can have the investment.

I am an east coast MP too, and we have long seen our potential enemies as coming from the east—that is why most of those airfields that are now redundant are on that side of the country. However, we must always look forward and support RAF decisions.

4.59 pm
Sitting suspended for Divisions in the House.

5.25 pm
On resuming—

Mrs Trevelyan: I was given a great deal of leeway before the Division bell went, and I will not abuse the privilege.

One more thing I wanted to raise with the Minister was the value of our pilots. The RAF is making decisions that I entirely understand are difficult for those in the Lincolnshire area—in moving how it does training, and indeed in finding a new home for the Red Arrows. I know that RAF Leeming and the north of England would welcome them with open arms. It would be lovely to have a northern point where we have planes in Boulmer—we look after the air traffic control, but we do not have anything that flies.

Notwithstanding that, the key point is that these pilots are extraordinary people and one of the nation's great assets—not only because of their own human endeavour and great bravery, but because we invest millions of pounds in each of them. It is so important that we consider them an asset rather than a cost. There is the wrap-around that goes with the pilots, and indeed the teams who work with them, and the pilots and their families need to be looked after. We come back to housing and how we invest the money in the MOD budget to ensure that we are not accidently failing to invest properly in the whole family around our pilots, with us losing the huge investment made by the MOD and the RAF through lack of consideration of that wider family support. I leave that for the Minister to consider.

The RAF can never speak for itself, and it is a great challenge for those who serve that their voice is silenced, but we can thank them for their extraordinary work on our behalf in defending us and our nation, while remembering that their decisions are made looking forwards to the fight that we do not yet know exists—preparing for the unknown and thinking strategically, so as to be able to adapt to whatever the future threats might be. I hope very much that the Minister will consider carefully how we look after all these pilots and engineers as we find a new home for them.

5.27 pm

Gerald Jones (Merthyr Tydfil and Rhymney) (Lab): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Mr Pritchard. I start by congratulating my hon. Friend the Member for Lincoln (Karen Lee) on securing the debate and the informative and passionate speech she made, outlining the impact and effect of any proposed closure for RAF Scampton and RAF Linton-on-Ouse.

We all recognise that the requirements of the defence estate will change over time and that there is a need to modernise to reflect that. However, any restructuring of the estate must enhance our military capability and deliver value for money for the British taxpayer while providing flexibility, as highlighted by my hon. Friend the Member for Bridgend (Mrs Moon). These two proposed closures are particularly disappointing, coming as they do in the RAF’s centenary year. The closure of either site would have a significant impact on the livelihoods of a large number of people, as we have heard: we know that 600 personnel are working at RAF Scampton and just under 300 at RAF Linton-on-Ouse. If those sites were to close, servicemen and women and their families would be required to move, and civilian staff would face redeployment.

Those closures would also affect the wider community. As Members are aware, and as my hon. Friend the Member for Lincoln and others highlighted, MOD sites are important to the local economies in which they are situated as well as the wider supply chains that support the work of the bases. In that vein, I ask the Minister what assessment the Department has made of the economic impact of closing the two sites. Will he also set out in as much detail as possible the discussions that have taken place with personnel at those bases and the options that have been made available to civilian staff? What help and support will be given to civilian employees who are unable to move?

Mrs Trevelyan: I know that the shadow Minister is passionate about his defence brief and we have spoken many times. Is there a Labour position on what would be done at RAF Scampton and RAF Linton-on-Ouse?
It is important that we look at civilian employees who are not able to move and the impact any closure would have on them. They may have restrictions that perhaps Air Force personnel do not have.

RAF Scampton is known to many as the base for the world-famous Red Arrows, as well as having historic links to the Dambusters. As my hon. Friend the Member for Scunthorpe (Nic Dakin) has highlighted, there are historic links to RAF Scampton that we must consider. I ask the Minister to assure the House that any decision about the future of the site would take full account of those historic links.

To address the hon. Lady’s intervention, the Leader of the Opposition has made it clear that we want to see RAF Scampton continue as the home for the Red Arrows, for many years to come. It is a case of prioritising and taking into consideration my points about the links it has, as well as the economic impact of closures, not just on the RAF but on the wider economy and community.

Can the Minister outline what consideration has been given to preserving the heritage centre at RAF Scampton? We understand that the Government are considering other potential defence uses for the site at RAF Linton-on-Ouse, ahead of any potential closure. Can the Minister set out what possible uses there may be and what the timescale is for exploring those options? It is important, as we have said, to look at the wider impact and the community value of the sites.

The announcement of these two closures will undoubtedly raise concerns about other possible cuts and efficiencies that may come about as a result of the modernising defence programme. In light of this, can the Minister take the opportunity to update the House on the progress of that programme and, crucially, when he expects to be reporting on it?

5.32 pm

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Defence (Mr Tobias Ellwood): It is a pleasure to respond to this debate, and I join the others in congratulating the hon. Member for Lincoln (Karen Lee) on securing it.

I begin with a declaration of interest. I am a private pilot and I am pleased to say that the last plane I flew was a Typhoon out of RAF Coningsby, which I took through the sound barrier. That is an example of what the hon. Member for Bridgend (Mrs Moon)—who is no longer in her place—mentioned earlier of dealing with threats, as clearly my presence in the air over the east of England pushed away any Russian threats that day. RAF Coningsby is a fantastic example of what the county of Lincolnshire offers the RAF. We should be very proud of what happens at that base and at all the other bases across the county, and indeed across the country.

Before we discuss the individual basing decisions, it would be remiss of me not to briefly acknowledge, as others have done, the 100th anniversary of the Royal Air Force, a merger of the Royal Flying Corps and the Royal Naval Air Service created the first independent air force in the world. At the time, General Haig commented that no one would be so foolish as to think that planes would be usefully employed in the objectives of reconnaissance for the purposes of war. He was a cavalry man who thought that the only way of gaining intelligence on the battlefield was on the back of a horse. We now know that the Air Force would become a significant component in our military capability.

Indeed, it was our superb air power victory in the battle of Britain that led to the cancellation of Operation Sea Lion, the planned Nazi invasion of England.

The size of the RAF has fluctuated. Before the war it was around 31,000; at the height of the war it was 264,000; today it is around 30,000. Such were its requirements that much of the country, especially in the eastern counties, was peppered with bases, landing strips, early warning systems and the factories that made the aircraft, all geared to support the war effort. Today, thanks to technological advances and changing threats and tactics, our air power footprint is very different indeed. We have a leaner, more versatile and more capable fighting force than we have ever had.

However, we find ourselves responsible for a legacy estate that owns 2% to 3% of UK land, and we realise we cannot afford to keep that going. A significant amount of that land is surplus to requirement. As a result, the MOD undertook a wide-ranging study of the entire estate, culminating in what was known as the better defence announcement in November 2016. That study identified many areas that could be used more efficiently, but stated that overall the estate was too big and expensive, with too many sites in the wrong location. We therefore embarked on a transformation of our estate. We will invest £4 billion over the next 10 years to upgrade key sites—and, yes, we will reduce our footprint elsewhere.

We have a total of 91 sites across the defence estate. Painful though it is, those will have to be reconciled. I hope that that results in a more modern and capability-focused estate. That approach will provide the modern facilities that the RAF needs and give personnel better employment opportunities for their partners and, with fewer movements during an RAF career, the ability to put down roots in their local community, which my hon. Friend the Member for Berwick-upon-Tweed (Mrs Trevelyan) mentioned. Crucially, that work is being done not by a central body—not by the MOD or the Defence Infrastructure Organisation—but by the armed forces and, in this case, the RAF, which is best placed to understand what it requires to support the delivery of defence in the United Kingdom.

That takes us to the sites that are the subject of the debate. First, as was said, RAF Scampton is steeped in history, but it is of course most famous for 617 Squadron and its daring Dambuster raid on 16 May 1943. As I mentioned, Lincolnshire is blessed with a number of other RAF bases, including Waddington and Cranwell, which I visited recently, and Lossiemouth. RAF Scampton is not in good condition. Some buildings have changed little since world war two. The station is in a poor state of repair, as indeed is the runway. I make it very clear, difficult though it is to hear, that it would require significant investment to restore the base to a suitable standard for the aircraft we use today.

I absolutely recognise the passion—that was illustrated in the powerful speech by the hon. Member for Lincoln (Karen Lee)—and the sense of nostalgia about the tough choices concerning the future of RAF Scampton. It simply would not be an efficient use of public money for the Royal Air Force to retain that site purely for heritage reasons. Instead, it will continue to concentrate
its resources on active sites that contribute to the defence outputs that will shape the future. Fortunately, as I said, many of those sites are based in Lincolnshire, so we will not remove that county’s important relationship with the RAF.

The Royal Air Force, the MOD and I, as a Minister, are not indifferent to the heroic contributions of those who served at Scampton—not least the Dambusters. I can think of no more fitting tribute than the newly re-formed 617 Squadron, which will be based at RAF Marham with the world’s most advanced jets in the form of the F-35 Lightning.

It is those difficult factors that led me to conclude in my announcement to Parliament on 24 July 2018 that RAF Scampton needed to close. We have ensured that our personnel are fully aware of the plans for the future of the site and we can begin to work with interest to prepare the long-term locations for the units, including the famous Red Arrows as well as No. 1 Air Control Centre and the Mobile Meteorological Unit.

I heard the passion that was expressed about the connectivity between Scampton and the Red Arrows, but I would argue that they are a national asset. I think the hon. Lady knows that they have not only been based in Scampton, although there is a current bond there. They spend a fair bit of time in Bournemouth, dare I say it, when they are doing the air shows down in the south of the country. They move around, doing 60 air shows a year not only in this country but elsewhere, and they have moved in the time since they came into existence in 1965. They have been at Fairford, where another international air show takes place, they have been at Kemble and they were at Scampton before moving to Cranwell and then back to Scampton—and yes, they now need to move again.

Of course it is dramatic when the Red Arrows move, but we must bear in mind the costs of keeping that runway and its facilities open and making the best use of the limited budget that we have. This is a tough decision to make, but we must provide them with a home that is fit for purpose. There are now detailed discussions; I know that the hon. Lady wants to know more information about them, but this is subject to discussions; I know that the hon. Lady wants to know more about them, but this is subject to discussions with the Civil Aviation Authority and there are difficulties with sharing absolutely everything. If I can agree to meet her one on one, we can have a further discussion about this, which I hope will be of help to her. We have already identified a number of options to ensure there is a home fit for the Red Arrows.

If I may turn to RAF Linton-on-Ouse, again, we heard a powerful but measured understanding of what needs to be put forward for the future of this base from my hon. Friend the Member for Thirsk and Malton (Kevin Hollinrake). As he is well aware, and I think touched on in his contribution, the Tucano aircraft used by No. 1 Flying Training School, the main users of the site, will go out of service in October 2019. The essential Basic Fast Jet training will also move to RAF Valley, as has also been mentioned, using the Texan aircraft type.

With the main occupants due to leave in 2019, the Royal Air Force assessed that there was no requirement to maintain the station in the long term. The remaining units are due to be moved to existing sites, further consolidating the Royal Air Force into core locations up and down the country. Like RAF Scampton, this is an example of how we are driving down our running costs and consolidating our people and our investment into fewer sites but ones that are better maintained.

Understanding the realisation of the defence estate is difficult, and some painful decisions must be made. As it was, it no longer represented the modern-day armed forces it was meant to serve. It was too large, and both our people and our investment were spread too thinly across the entire United Kingdom.

Kevin Hollinrake: Will the Minister touch on the issue of capacity? There were concerns raised by people who, I think, had no vested interest here, but were concerned that a single base could not deliver the level of pilot training required for our future needs and some of the contracts we have for other nations. Can we guarantee today that RAF Valley will be able to meet that need?

Mr Ellwood: I am happy to give my hon. Friend that assurance. I visited RAF Cranwell only a couple of weeks ago and had a full briefing on the progression of the pilots, depending on which aircraft they will eventually use. He also touched on something else. The expertise that we have in this country is phenomenal. We not only train our pilots to an exemplary standard but train pilots for other nations too. That is important for the soft power relationships that we build with other nations.

Nic Dakin: Before the Minister finishes, could he address the points that I raised about the community assets at the Kirton-in-Lindsey site, which will be disposed of as part of the disposal of RAF Scampton? Will he commit to ensuring that the Ministry of Defence engages fully and proactively with the town council and others who have community interests?

Mr Ellwood: The hon. Gentleman makes an important point about what happens once a decision is made, and the importance of having a strategy, working with the local authorities and with the devolved Administrations in some cases, to take best advantage of the estate that is being provided. Discussions happen with the Defence Infrastructure Organisation on that very front. The air base that he mentioned was not part of the subject matter for this particular debate, which was focused on these two RAF bases, but I would be more than delighted to meet him to be apprised of what is happening and to discuss that in further detail.

I am sure hon. Members will agree that the men and women of our armed forces, who do so much for our country, deserve to work and train at sites with modern facilities, and that the civil servants and contractors who support them in delivering their outputs need the certainty that the establishment of core sites provides. Let us also not forget the families around the serving personnel, who must be able to benefit from the necessary schooling for their children and be able to buy their homes, put down roots and be part of local communities.

The world is becoming a more complex and dangerous place. We are very fortunate with the history of the RAF; what it has gone through and how it has helped to shape the world and who we are today. I simply make the case, as we head toward the next Budget, that we must keep investing in all our armed forces and in our bases to ensure that we continue to have a place and a voice at the international top table.

With the main occupants due to leave in 2019, the Royal Air Force assessed that there was no requirement to maintain the station in the long term. The remaining units are due to be moved to existing sites, further consolidating the Royal Air Force into core locations up and down the country. Like RAF Scampton, this is
Karen Lee: I thank all hon. Members, the shadow Minister and the Minister for attending the debate and for speaking, especially on such an important subject. I thank the Minister for the offer of a meeting, which I genuinely appreciate. I want to make one final plea from the people of Lincoln to let us keep our Red Arrows in Lincolnshire—although I think we all know that it probably will not be my final one. I thank you, Mr Pritchard, for your excellent chairing, and I thank my hon. Friend the Member for Scunthorpe (Nic Dakin), who has been wonderful. This is the first time I have led a debate, and I will certainly remember it.

Mark Pritchard (in the Chair): I congratulate the hon. Lady on having led her first debate so ably.

Question put and agreed to.

Resolved,

That this House has considered the closures of RAF Scampton and RAF Linton-on-Ouse.

5.47 pm

Sitting adjourned.
Westminster Hall

Wednesday 17 October 2018

[Stewart Hosie in the Chair]

Local Government Reform: Greater London

9.30 am

Stewart Hosie (in the Chair): Before we start, you can see that we are not oversubscribed. I would like the summing up to start in an hour’s time. Say everything you need to say, but please do not feel that you need to take all the time if it is not appropriate. I call Andrew Rosindell to move the motion.

Andrew Rosindell (Romford) (Con): I beg to move.

That this House has considered local government reform in Greater London.

Thank you very much, Mr Hosie, and good morning to all. I am grateful for this opportunity to open what I hope will be a wide-ranging debate on the structure and responsibilities of local government across London and the need to embrace the need for fundamental reform that will better serve the people of this great capital of our nation in the decades to come. I wish to begin a conversation involving both sides of the House with the constituents that we represent.

Our United Kingdom capital of London comprises an amazing patchwork of counties, cities, boroughs, royal boroughs, towns, communities, villages, hamlets and estates. I say “London” because that is the name of our national capital—in truth, in 2018, the lines of where London begins and ends are rather blurred. There is in fact much confusion between London as the capital of the United Kingdom, where Parliament and Government sit, London as Greater London, which was how our predecessors decided to construct the shape and boundaries of the city in the 1960s; and London as a wider region that includes what many people still call the home counties.

It is time to reassess whether Greater London, as created in 1964 with the formation of London boroughs, or the particular form of London government that was created in 1998 with a Mayor and Assembly, are fit for purpose in the years to come. We have reached a point where serious reform is needed. I hope all Members agree that we should not dismiss change as too difficult to tackle. We have a duty to look at how we can evolve London government to better suit the needs of Londoners and the wider region around our capital. Let us not be afraid to reconfigure how London government works and to embrace reform and renewal—in doing so, let us return power to local communities, where it belongs, and restore local identities that are rooted in English history but are now in danger of being lost.

As colleagues will know only too well, I am deeply proud of being the Member of Parliament for my wonderful home town of Romford, a traditional Essex market town that has existed since medieval times. Since 1964, it has fallen under the remit of the London borough of Havering, the borough on the most eastern side of what is now called Greater London. Let me tell the House that, despite more than 50 years of being a so-called London borough, Romford, and Havering generally, is still very much part of Essex. Whatever local government structures and boundaries are imposed by Whitehall, the true identity of local people has never been lost and never will be. People in my borough are Essex through and through, and they are proud of their heritage—indeed, becoming a London borough did not mean that Romford and Havering stopped being part of Essex.

Essex is a real place that has evolved over many centuries. It is a historic county with its own identity and distinct culture, combined with religious, social, sporting and business networks. Our postal address is “Romford, Essex”. We cheer for the Essex county cricket team. Our local regiment is the Essex Regiment, which has been awarded the freedom of Havering. Our Church of England parishes fall within the diocese of Chelmsford. Our identity is defined by geography, not by local government structures, which change regularly, depending on Government policy at the time and ever-moving electoral boundaries. A change in the administration of local services in the 1960s did not end our town or borough’s connection with the county of Essex. Today we fall under a London-wide authority, but my constituents continue to cherish their Essex identity. Good for them—I feel exactly the same.

This is not unique to Essex or any other part of Greater London—people from Kent, Surrey, Hertfordshire and indeed Middlesex also value their county identities. London boroughs may no longer fall under the remit of county councils, but we are still very much part of what are known as the traditional or proper counties of England. These are real places with historical, geographical and social identities that have existed throughout the ages and that should be fully recognised as integral to the identities of our towns and boroughs today, irrespective of local government structures at any given point. These structures have come and gone in London over the years, with the London County Council, the Greater London Council, the Greater London Authority, and now the Mayor of London—just as Havering was once under the Essex County Council, followed by the GLC and then the GLA. I hope hon. Members agree that none of those changes should be allowed to erode true local identities.

I raise that issue because it forms the basis of my next argument. Local government in London should be just that: local. It should be as localised as possible, so that local people are able to control what happens in their communities and towns or on their doorstep. Remote and centralised regional government that fails to understand local identities and that rules from the centre, forgetting about the needs of the wider areas of the London region, is never going to be popular. Just like the GLC before it, I fear that the GLA is heading in the same direction. The Greater London Authority and Mayor of London are failing to serve all areas within Greater London effectively. It is clear that the project has expanded too far, grown too powerful, and has become too interfering, too centralised, too bureaucratic, too costly and utterly remote from the needs of the real people, particularly in areas such as Romford and other parts of outer London.

Since the creation of a directly elected Mayor and an Assembly in 2000 provided for a so-called strong mayor model, there has been a clear contrast between the powers of the Mayor and those of the Assembly. The
subsequent Greater London Authority Act 2007 accorded the Mayor even greater powers in respect of functions, spanning across planning, housing, large developments, skills and training. While it is true that the Assembly’s powers were also strengthened in 2007, the provisions were too little and too late to provide a proper check on the mayorality. A comparative analysis of our friends across the pond in New York and of other cities such as Tokyo and Berlin show that their councils enjoy actual powers of scrutiny, which ours in London do not.

It is time to reform the whole structure of local government. I shall set out what the Government and we in the House should consider as a basis for reform. First, the powers of the Mayor should be strictly limited to what borough councils cannot do effectively for themselves. The so-called London plan should be dumped completely, and the power to decide how best to plan and develop our communities and boroughs should rest with the people who are elected to do that job. The Government can help by allowing the development of new towns beyond London, but councils must also play their part in ensuring we build the homes that are needed. Let us give boroughs back the power and trust them to make true local decisions in their local communities.

Why do we need a second tier for planning, when what is required is a more effective means to make local decisions in the interest of local communities, with a faster turnaround, so we can build the homes we need across the region? I accept that there is a need for co-ordination across the entire London region on things such as transport and major infrastructure projects, but the Mayor should be a facilitator or an organiser who brings together local authorities and public bodies to make things happen. Funding for projects should go directly to the boroughs, bypassing the bureaucracy at City Hall.

Secondly, policing should go back to being truly local. Each borough should have its own borough commander, and the tri-borough system should be ended or reformed. The leader of each council or their deputy should have the political responsibility for policing within that borough. Powers currently centralised in City Hall should come back to the town hall. I believe that leaders of boroughs are better placed to respond to the needs of their communities and to work with a dedicated police force, which knows and understands its patch better than anyone else.

Thirdly, the London Assembly should be replaced with something like a council of London, comprised of elected council leaders from the region. I say “the region”, because this goes way beyond the now outdated boundaries of the 1960s model of Greater London. Transport affects the people of a much wider area—I would call it “the UK capital region”. The slimmed-down, London-wide authority should primarily focus on transport, which clearly must be considered regionally as it goes way beyond the London boroughs. The M25 extends way beyond Greater London, and motorways, A roads and an expanding road network lead into London. The London Underground stretches from Amersham to Epping, neither of which falls within the Greater London boundaries, yet they have underground stations. Trains bring in commuters from across the south-east and other parts of the region. Airports stretch from London Heathrow to London Southend, and include London Luton, London Stansted and London Gatwick, most of which are not in Greater London. There needs to be a serious rethink of transport in the entire region, and that is what I believe should be the focus of the newly restructured authority for the London region. It is no longer relevant to think of transport just in the context of Greater London. That outdated model needs to go.

The new council of democratically elected leaders would have real authority to speak up for their areas, and they would cost a lot less than the current Assembly. They would understand what is required locally because they would be elected locally and would have an incentive to make things work for their boroughs. With a much stronger hand, they would also be empowered to scrutinise the Mayor—or the first leader, as I would rename the role—to ensure that everything they do is for the purpose of facilitating services rather than becoming an alternative centre of political power away from local communities.

We must also respect and appreciate the distinctiveness of London’s areas. It is ludicrous that the Mayor of London has such an expansive and supreme authority over a vast swathe of southern England. The City of Westminster, with all its grandeur, has very little in common with boroughs such as Havering, Hillingdon, Bromley or Enfield. Across our region are districts with totally different needs, but as power has become more centralised, local needs have become more neglected. It is time for reform.

The unfair allocation of funds is also a major issue in boroughs such as mine—the London Borough of Havering has been scandalously impacted by inadequate funding settlements over the decades due to flaws in the current formula and funding system. The Minister may not be aware that Havering is the lowest-funded east London borough per head of population. Some London boroughs receive more than twice as much per head. How can that be right? That is despite Havering’s having the highest proportion of elderly people across London, many of whom are deeply reliant on social care provision. That dire funding shortfall has forced my council drastically to reduce spending or increase council tax just to stay afloat, yet we send £400 a year per head of population to City Hall. The result is that council tax on a £4.5 million property in Westminster is substantially less than it is on a £365,000 property in Havering. How can that be right? That huge disparity must be addressed. It punishes lifelong residents of the borough and leaves many pensioners—it particularly affects elderly people—struggling to get by.

Devolving power back to local councils is exactly what a Conservative Government should be aiming to do. Why should councils not have the ability to come together to take on the management of public services in the area for which they are responsible? If Havering Council wishes to take over the management of the NHS, why should it not be given the opportunity to do so? If it prepared a business case, worked out the finances and submitted a bid to the Government, and if—and only if—the bid stacked up, why should it not be able to manage health services in the borough?

It is unlikely that one council could do that alone, but a group of councils could. For instance, if Havering formed a group with Barking and Dagenham and Redbridge, with Brentwood and Epping—the boroughs on the Essex side of my constituency—or with whatever
other grouping came together, and put in a bid for an integrated service to operate the NHS, an adult college or some other public body, would not that be the obvious way to devolve power back to our local communities? That would give real democratic control over large areas of the state and allow many different models to be developed. Let us think out of the box and embrace such new ideas. I believe we must empower local boroughs in London to take back control—they know what their local communities need best—and end the never-ending centralisation of power in City Hall or Whitehall.

London, as the UK’s capital, needs clearly defined boundaries. The City of London has always been the heart of our capital for trade and finance, with the City of Westminster as the centre of Parliament and Government, but our capital is wider than that. It includes some or all other central areas—boroughs such as Kensington and Chelsea, and parts of Camden, Lambeth, Southwark, Islington, Greenwich, Tower Hamlets and so on. That is the central capital area. It is simply not right to say that the entirety of Greater London is the capital of the UK—that is a big confusion. Very few people living in towns such as Romford, Sutton, Enfield, Bexley, Croydon or Ruislip consider themselves to be living in the capital. Greater London is not the capital; the central area is the capital. It is time we properly defined where the capital actually starts and ends. It should be the central area that I have described. It should include the central areas where special measures for policing, security, transport and development are required to suit the needs of a global city. Beyond that, different priorities are needed for the wider London region beyond the actual capital. I urge the Government to take powers away from City Hall and restore them for towns and boroughs beyond the central London area.

Finally, I believe that it is also time to review the boundaries and names of London boroughs. So many anomalies divide communities because old boundaries have not been reviewed for decades. They are no longer relevant and it is time they were reviewed to suit local communities. To give examples from my own area, Rush Green, where I was born, is divided between Havering and Barking and Dagenham—it is a ludicrous boundary that runs down a road and divides a community. Those areas are all part of Romford, but we stick to these old boundaries from years ago that are no longer relevant. Another example is Chadwell Heath, another part of Romford that is not in my borough but divided between the London Borough of Barking and Dagenham and the London Borough of Redbridge. I know hon. Members representing constituencies across London can come up with lots of examples of similar situations in which pointless divisions exist. Those should be resolved with local consultation to ensure that boroughs fit local communities and meet the needs of local people.

I believe that restoring local identities as well as renaming boroughs where local people wish to do so should be on the reform agenda. Shepway District Council in Kent was quite sensibly renamed as Folkestone and Hythe District Council, dumping the pointless, artificial name that had no resonance with people. A borough such as Havering—that is the nice name of a small country village in my constituency, but a name that does not represent the communities of that London borough—could be renamed the London Borough of Romford and Hornchurch, which is more representative of the borough’s two major towns. We should have a general review of names that match local towns’ identities to those of local people, so that they can feel pride in their boroughs.

I can talk about other boroughs but I am hesitant to do so because MPs representing those boroughs are not here. The London Borough of Waltham Forest has a completely artificial name—a bit of Walthamstow and a bit of Epping Forest—while the area of Redbridge is actually Ilford, and Hounslow is Chiswick and Brentford. We need to go back to sensible names so that people identify with the communities that they live in. Those 1960s names need to be reviewed and it would be incredibly popular if the Government led a review and gave local people the chance to decide their boundaries and restore traditional names. Who knows, Minister? Perhaps names like Hampstead, Paddington, Stoke Newington, Wembley or Finsbury could be restored. Replacing the names of boroughs that do not resonate with the history and identity of their communities would be extremely popular.

I have floated many new ideas for a reform of London government, some of which I hope hon. Members and the Minister will consider seriously. Whatever our views, let us begin a debate on and work towards the change that will bring about better government across the whole of the London region, the capital of our United Kingdom, and, I believe, the greatest city on earth.

9.53 am

Tommy Sheppard (Edinburgh East) (SNP): Thank you, Mr Hosie. I have debated matters of English local government in this room on several occasions, and I remark now, as I remarked then, that I quite often feel as though I have gatecrashed someone else’s party. On this occasion, I feel as though people have got the wrong date for the party; I have never been to a debate in this Chamber that has been so sparlessly attended, and it feels really weird to be called to reply to the debate when only the mover of the motion, the hon. Member for Romford (Andrew Rosindell), has spoken. I am grateful to him for giving me the opportunity to make some remarks.

Although I may not have been invited to the party, I sense that the music is very similar to that which we hear north of the border. Some of people’s concerns and desires for reform of local government administration in London and, indeed, throughout England are motivated by feelings very similar to those that drove the cause for Scottish devolution and that are now driving the cause for Scottish independence. They are feelings of remoteness, of not being in charge of the place in which you live, and of not having a shared sense of identity with others who live in that place. I am therefore sympathetic to such debates, and I would say that they are actually all part of one grand debate about how we reform the antiquated structure that is the United Kingdom, in order to create governance on these islands that is more fit for the 21st century.

That said, there is a world of difference between the devolution of legislative authority to a nation within a political union, and the decentralisation of administration within the largest country of that political union, which is England. I want to speak as an observer in the debate.
The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Housing, Communities and Local Government (Jake Berry): Perhaps the hon. Gentleman will take this opportunity to express the Scottish Government’s view on the devolution of powers that are currently held in Holyrood to towns and cities of Scotland. I am sure the people there would like to take control of their lives and have proper devolution from Holyrood to other areas of Scotland—

Stewart Hosie (in the Chair): Order.

Jake Berry: Within the context of Greater London, of course.

Stewart Hosie (in the Chair): Please stay within the context of the debate, which is rather narrow.

Tommy Sheppard: The Minister’s intervention was perhaps tangential, but I do not mind replying to it. Of course, I cannot speak on behalf of the Scottish Government, but from what I observe, over the last 11 years they have driven the idea of putting power in the hands of local communities, through their work in the highlands and islands of Scotland; through their work to relax controls on local authorities; and, in particular, through their work on the Community Empowerment (Scotland) Act 2015 and the community land fund, which gives local communities the ability to get together, without reference to their local authority, and take over derelict parts of land or buildings to bring them into community use. There is lots of good stuff going on in Scotland.

I will not prolong matters, because this is not the most subscribed debate that I have taken part in, but let me make three brief observations for the record. The first is that I believe, just as I believe that governance of Scotland should be a matter for the people who live there, that the governance of London should be a matter for those who live there—that principle needs to be established. I remember the dangers of doing things without popular consent. I was a London councillor in Hackney from 1986-1993—I represented the Defoe ward in Stoke Newington—and even then, in the mid-1980s, there was a genuine sense of grievance among many people about the fact that the borough of Stoke Newington had been abolished 20 years before. They identified much more with that area, as the hon. Member for Romford said, than with the new borough council that was created in 1964.

I understand the need for local identity, and I think it is vital that, as the debate continues, attempts are made to engage with the people of London about the various options that are available for the governance of this great city. I know not what the plans of the Mayor, the GLA, or the London boroughs are, but I hope and would welcome any initiatives that look towards engaging the public through a “People’s Assembly” or through a commission that will look at particular structures for the future.

Secondly, we ought to define the principles on which reform should take place as well as the criteria and the objectives that we are trying to achieve. Central to that must be the notion of equality and fairness across this great city. To that end, I think we ought to address the elephant in the room that no one has yet talked about: the City of London Corporation, which operates almost like a reverse-Bantustan in the City and commands a great and disproportionate amount of power and wealth in the capital. Any reform that does not look at how that can be distributed more fairly across the city is probably not worth undertaking.

My final point, which refers to some of the points made by the hon. Member for Romford, is that in these debates—I think that this is true in Scotland, England, and throughout every advanced democracy—it is important to make a distinction between democratic political control by communities and the administration of services. Too often, we get the two confused. That means, for example, that we end up saying, “It’s impossible to run a certain service on too local a level, and therefore we won’t bother letting local people have control of that”, or, “We won’t bother decentralising and setting up structures that allow people to govern a local area, because they cannot control or manage a service on that basis; it’s completely uneconomic.”

In a model whereby an agency provides a service in a public interest framework across a wider area, however—the police are an apt example—but within which local communities and local councils are able to act as the client for that service and to say what they want from the agency, there is a way of giving people democratic control over what is happening in their area without them having to be the managers of the individual service. The same is true for pretty much any major service. In fact, the same is now true for a lot of back-room services, such as information technology or administration, which would probably be much better organised on a larger scale to service a wide range of authorities beneath them that command and direct what needs to be done.

If we do that, we begin to open new possibilities for new, much more localised and decentralised structures that relate to local communities. Such structures would allow people to get much more involved than they are, and at the same time to retain services in a public interest framework and in public ownership. If we were to do that—London might be the place to start—we could play catch-up with much of the rest of Europe, where we can find much more democratic local decision making and, crucially, much greater levels of participation in local affairs and elections than we have in this country. At the end of the day, that is the thing that we all need to address: no matter where we are in the United Kingdom, it is rare for the majority of people to take part in an election for their local council. That is surely something that we need to change.

I am glad that this debate is getting things started—I hope—and next time perhaps we can attract a few more people, in particular Members of Parliament from the capital city, to engage in it. We can take matters forward at that point.

10.2 am

Jim McMahon (Oldham West and Royton) (Lab/Co-op): This is a really interesting debate, which is broader than London. It could be argued that if we develop a real settlement that pushes power down to communities, that ought to benefit every community in England. That will be the spirit in which I approach my response to some of the points that have been made.
A lot of the devolution debate and discussion, certainly over the past five or six years, has been about trying to get power from Westminster down to the next level, wherever that might be; in London, it is the capital, but elsewhere it will be metro areas or even some county deals in which counties have come together. That has been necessary because we are still a very centralised country, and too much power is contained not in this place—people who work here who believe that they are powerful are seriously deluded—but in Whitehall, where it still sits. We want to wrestle as much power as possible from civil servants, who are disconnected from the communities that are affected by the decisions that they make, and give that power back to local people.

That has to be at the most appropriate level, because the organisation of services is complex. Some are absolutely rooted in a localised geography, but in other cases it will make far more sense for a service to be decided and delivered at a different level—whether it is a district, a metropolitan or London borough, London itself, or a regional grouping—but it has to be right for that circumstance and for the decision that is being devolved down. The assumption should always be local.

If any power is devolved, a test should be in place to ask the question: where is it best to place this new power that is being devolved? For example, in places where we see devolution of the adult education budget, there has not really been a conversation about whether a combined authority or even a Greater London arrangement is the best place for that budget to sit, versus a local authority. That is odd, because that debate is taking place in other areas—such as Greater Manchester, which has the most advanced health devolution settlement in England; that settlement is devolved to the 10 local authorities, not to the combined authority or to the Mayor.

This move that we are taking as a nation is interesting, but it is not neat, it is not pretty and it is massively confusing for a lot of people. That does not mean that it is not necessary. We need to prove concept and prove that devolution can be made to work. We need to prove that to people who do not believe that devolution can work, and who believe that to get fairness and equity across the country, we should organise from the capital so that everyone gets the same. They are the people we need to convince.

Andrew Rosindell: The hon. Gentleman is making a lot of good points, and we agree on many things. Does he accept that an area such as mine, right on the edge of Greater London, is totally different from places such as Westminster, Kensington and Chelsea, or Islington? More powers should be given back to us in our area so Westminster, Kensington and Chelsea, or Islington?

Jim McMahon: Perhaps I may prove my credentials. When I became the leader of Oldham Council, it stood out to me just how frustrated people were about their historical identities being challenged by a local authority that was artificially created in 1974. It did not work for either party: Oldhamers were frustrated that people in the surrounding district seemed to have an angst about them, because of this issue; and people in the district were frustrated because they did not feel that their identity was valued by the local authority. One of the first things I did on taking control of the council, therefore, was to change all the boundary signs back to reflect the district crest and the local identities of those places, which I believe are important.

That is sometimes a cause of confusion. The lines we draw on maps for administrative convenience—basically, we are talking about the most efficient administrative area for delivering and organising our public services—are often adopted to create a new brand identity for a place.
I see that happening where I am. Oldham, as a place, has one foot in Lancashire and one foot in the west riding of Yorkshire. Some people think they are Mancunian and others think they are Oldhamers, but identities travel even beyond that. It is true of every community in England, including every borough and town in London and Essex, that people do not stay in one place. They travel to work. Their relationships with places, communities, neighbouring towns and the heart of the capital, which the hon. Member for Romford (Andrew Rosindell) referred to, are complicated.

Let me make some practical suggestions. Power has been given to communities through the neighbourhood planning process. Communities can self-organise and decide what physical developments take place in their area, and they get some sense of being able to control what their community looks like at the end of that process. We do not do the same for revenue spend in local government. Think about the scrutiny we give to capital investment. When a capital project is initiated, it has to go through a number of gateways to get sign-off and be approved, and it then goes through evaluation and monitoring. We do not do that for revenue spend. We spend billions of pounds of public money every year, but we do not make the same assessment of whether it is invested in the right place or have a clear view of what return on investment we should expect. Equally, communities generally are not involved in organising that.

There is no reason why people at neighbourhood level—whether that is a ward or a collection of wards that make up a town's identity, which the hon. Gentleman mentioned—could not organise a community plan to corral all the public services in their area and decide where the local GP practice ought to be or how the police ought to organise. Local people should be able to decide how public servants work together to ensure that services are delivered in the right context for that place.

Clearly, there will always be a role for local authorities, and for strategic authorities that cover issues that naturally transcend local boundaries. We have already heard about transport, but policing now transcends those boundaries, too. Policing is far more complicated than it was before the 1960s, when we had local police forces with their own identities. We need a police force that can meet the challenges of cyber-crime, terrorism, cross-border crime and many other issues, but not at the exclusion of neighbourhood policing.

In some places, because of austerity—let us be clear that it costs money to do this well—and the demands of terrorism, cyber-crime and all the other new crimes that are really stretching the police force, resources have been transferred from neighbourhood level to the centre so the police can meet significant cost demands. People see that, because of austerity, public services are becoming more and more removed from the communities in which they live, and that hugely affects the connection they feel. We should look at that.

We need a clearly articulated devolution framework for the whole of England—London would be a beneficiary of that—rather than ad hoc deals that are agreed behind closed doors. We should not pit one place against another but have a comprehensive settlement—a framework for power to be devolved. We should start at the grassroots and work upwards, with an assumption in favour of devolution. That should be supported by fair funding to meet need and demand in local areas.

That at least would allow us to test the ideas we are debating and to see whether one framework for the whole of England works. Without that, we will always be looking in the rear-view mirror at the consequences of what has been agreed. We need to get organised. We need a plan. This offer has been made before, but Labour Members are willing to work across party lines on the issues that are not party political. Much of this is not party political—it is about people and place.

10.13 am

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Housing, Communities and Local Government (Jake Berry): I congratulate my hon. Friend the Member for Romford (Andrew Rosindell) on securing this debate, which is both hugely important for his constituents and nationally important in the wider framework of devolution. It is very timely and deeply appropriate given the situation we find ourselves in.

The debate has been about the future, but let me dwell for a moment on the history of local government reform in London, which to some extent put us in this situation. I do not have to tell my hon. Friend, who is proud to have been born and bred in Essex, about the 1960 Herbert commission, but it is worth focusing briefly on the Greater London Council years. We can learn a lot from our history. During those years, when the current shadow Chancellor was chairman of the finance committee, what we used to refer to as “loony left” politics came to the fore. Of course, that is now mainstream Labour politics. As someone from the city of Liverpool, I was interested to see the Labour party, at its conference in that city, move back to endorsing the views of Derek Hatton: that councils should set illegal budgets and that there should be a general strike.

Jim McMahon: I suppose I ought to intervene, given that I was more or less invited to by that comment. To be absolutely clear—that came from the leadership of the Labour party a couple of years ago, so it is not a new response: we do not support the illegal setting of council budgets. We think councils have been given a rotten settlement, and in many places they struggle to meet their legal obligations.

The question for the Government is how they can provide the resources councils need to be confident that they can set a legal budget that provides security for the people who need it, particularly in adult social care and children’s safeguarding. The failure is not on the part of council leaders. No one proposes setting an illegal budget in any local authority in the country, but there are leaders who say, “We don’t think we can meet our legal obligations if this carries on.” So far, the Government have failed to provide a convincing response.

Stewart Hosie (in the Chair): Order. Now the politics are out of the way, I am sure we will get back to local government reform in Greater London.

Jake Berry: Well, of course the GLC was in league, through the Militant movement, with Derek Hatton’s Liverpool Labour party. It is worth focusing on the GLC. The hon. Member for Oldham West and Royton (Jim McMahon) parades the veneer of a gentle left—of
Jake Berry: Perhaps I should have stuck to history, which may be a slightly safer subject for me to talk about. My hon. Friend may think that it should have been called the Essex Olympics, but I am not sure that that would have had the same international cut-through as the London Olympics. It was a significant event, not just for London—and Essex, where it took place in the traditional Essex town of Stratford—but for our entire nation.

Those Olympics, which were thanks in no small part to the late, great Baroness Jowell and the Mayor of London at the time, my right hon. Friend the Member for Uxbridge and South Ruislip, showed how the GLA and London can be at their best. Another previous Mayor of London, Ken Livingstone, introduced the congestion charge, which was extremely well implemented and significantly reduced traffic levels in the city. The Oyster card is also hugely popular, which the GLA and the Mayor were responsible for.

My hon. Friend said that today should be the start of the debate about the future shape of mayoralty and local government in London. He will understand that starting the debate for change will be hard; it will be a long road and probably require primary legislation. Most importantly of all, it will require consensus. From the Government’s point of view, we hope any changes would come from a ground-up movement rather than a central diktat from Whitehall. That plays very well with my hon. Friend’s desire for his constituents to have more control of their lives.

We must not forget that the Conservative party is the party of English devolution. We did not create the Mayor of London but we have successfully created six Metro Mayors, who were elected in May 2017. Since that date, a Mayor of Sheffield has been elected and, subject to the consent of the House, next Monday we will finalise the creation of a Mayor north of the Tyne, in Newcastle. Those elections have brought the biggest single transfer of power from Whitehall back to the people of England since the first world war. As Conservatives, we should celebrate that and be deeply proud of it. All those mayoral devolution deals have been about transferring power.

Jime McMahon: The Minister talked about the biggest transfer of power since the second world war—

Jake Berry: First world war.

Jim McMahon: The first world war. Does that take into account the power that has been removed from local authorities, particularly on housing and education?

Jake Berry: I assume the shadow Minister is talking about the Greater Manchester Combined Authority and the transfer of power up from local authorities to the Mayor across the country. In areas of devolution, it has been done by consensus; he was a leader of one of those local authorities that are now part of the combined authorities, so I guess he would support that.

This debate is very important when looked at in the wider context of English devolution. The Government will shortly publicise their devolution framework, in which we will talk about what devolution should look like in the rest of England and give a clear roadmap for devolution across England, in compliance with a Conservative party manifesto commitment.
[Jake Berry]

In London, there is an opportunity to talk about how we might improve the scrutiny and accountability of the Mayor of London and of Mayors in general. For inspiration, my hon. Friend could look to the mayoral model put in place by our Government in Manchester, where rather than having an additional tier of GLA governance, it is a combined authority, with representatives—the leaders of those borough councils—working with the Mayor in a collaborative partnership, but with a strong voice for their borough in that relationship. London should look at new solutions like that, on the proviso that they are always ground-up and locally supported.

Andrew Rosindell: I am delighted by what the Minister has just said, because that is exactly what I said earlier: it would be far better to have an assembly or council of leaders from each borough who have a genuine understanding of what is needed in their local communities. I am afraid I do not think that the London Assembly fulfils that task in the way that is needed.

In the London Borough of Havering, the legitimacy of the Mayor and the GLA is hanging by a thread. If there were a referendum in my borough to opt out of the GLA and become a unitary authority, in my view there would be an overwhelming vote to exit—as it has been termed—the GLA. Most people would overwhelmingly want a separation and to restore control to our local communities. An area such as Havering feeds money into central London and pays far more for services from which we do not benefit; at the same time, the Mayor is able to interfere with our local area and override the council on planning. I hope that the Government will take this seriously and look at what reforms can be brought forward.

Jake Berry: The Government take this issue absolutely seriously. My hon. Friend made a brilliant speech that has been widely supported, in which he made the argument very well. To be clear, it is not the Government’s position that the GLA should be abolished, replaced or reformed; the Government welcome the discussion that my hon. Friend has led. If there is a drumbeat or a clarion call from his borough to look at reform of the GLA, he is quite right that he and his council should lead that debate; and on a ground-up basis come to Government and have that discussion with other boroughs. Our door is open for those discussions, but they must come from the ground-up, be locally supported and have consensus because it is his long-term political ambition to seek reform.

Andrew Rosindell: I thank the Minister for that invitation. Is he therefore willing to meet the newly elected leader of Havering Council, Councillor Damian White, who is the youngest Conservative leader of any council in the country, and me, to talk about how a borough such as Havering can change in a way that benefits our local community, with the support of our Government?

Jake Berry: Yes, I am. I hope that is helpful, and I congratulate my hon. Friend’s new council leader on winning the election.

Another reason why it is appropriate for boroughs to lead the conversation about whether the existing GLA boundaries and structures are appropriate is simply that they have not changed since the 1960s. Our world has changed very much since the 1960s. A lot of the debate about English devolution is driven by a wider debate about the future of our country after Brexit. There is an ambition and desire out there for what I refer to as “double devolution”—taking a very European idea of subsidiarity and embedding that in the relationship between local government and national government.

The Government have committed to come forward with the devolution framework to try to stimulate the debate about what devolution should look like across England. As we start with year zero of creating a new, ambitious, globally competitive country, what part can the constituent local authorities—in some cases, parish councils and unitary authorities in our local government family—play in driving forward our nation’s ambition?

I will touch on some of the specific points made by my hon. Friend in his excellent speech. When he started speaking, I wrote at the top of my piece of paper that the people of Essex want to take back control, although he got round to saying that himself. That plays into a much wider debate we should be having about people’s identity. As a proud Member of Parliament representing Lancashire, I am aware of the strength of the Lancashire identity, which in many ways was undermined in local government reform when we lost the city of Liverpool, the city of Manchester and large parts of Greater Manchester. There is a real role for Members of Parliament and local councils in reinforcing those historic county boundaries.

My hon. Friend spoke passionately about his identity as someone born in Essex and representing Essex but having been sucked into the London agglomeration in some way. I feel similarly about Lancashire. Of course, Lancashire is one of the few county palatine boroughs in our United Kingdom, having been awarded the status by the King for protecting England from marauding Scots—something we occasionally see today. We in Lancashire are deeply proud of that county palatine status. We love our friends north of the border, with whom we have a great relationship, but we also like to be cognisant of our history.

My hon. Friend was edging towards saying, without realising it, that the GLA may be better represented or reformed with a Manchester model: a combined authority with a strong voice for the boroughs. The late, great Tony Wilson, of Manchester music industry fame, said: “This is Manchester—we do things differently here.” Where Manchester leads, many parts of the country can follow. The GLA was set up in 2000, and the debate has simply moved on. That is why the Government, and I as a constituency Member of Parliament, see this as a welcome time to debate the future of the GLA.

Jim McMahon: The nearest equivalent organisation is London Councils, where council leaders across the Greater London area come together. Could that organisation be given combined authority status, with powers similar to Greater Manchester’s and the Mayor possibly taking the chair? Is that where Government thinking is leading?
Jake Berry: If the hon. Gentleman had listened to my earlier remarks, he would have heard me say that the Government are not suggesting that the GLA should be abolished, and we are not suggesting the creation of a combined authority. That is because the Conservatives, the party of English devolution, believe that devolution works best in England when it is ground-up and locally led. It is not for Whitehall to dictate what devolution should look like in Manchester, as he will appreciate, or to dictate what the changes—if any—that come forward for the GLA should be. It is for local politicians, led by Members of Parliament having this debate, to come forward to Government with ground-up proposals that the Government will look at, as we do with all such proposals.

Jim McMahon: I am sure the leaders of Yorkshire will be delighted with the spirit of that. Does that mean that we are heading towards a one Yorkshire devolution deal?

Jake Berry: I think the leaders of Yorkshire are always delighted when they hear me talk about devolution. As the hon. Gentleman knows—I do not want to be drawn too far from the subject of the debate—the Government have been clear: we remain committed to the implementation of the south Yorkshire city region deal, known as the Sheffield city region deal.

As someone who has lived in Sheffield, I am keen to see the near-£1 billion of Government money go into that economy. In that city there is the bizarre situation where four Labour authority leaders cannot agree collectively about what power they should have to release that money. The hon. Gentleman spoke of the challenges faced by boroughs across England in local government spending, and it strikes me as a little bit odd that when the Government are saying to four Labour boroughs, “Here is £30 million a year that we would like to give you to invest in growing your economy,” those Labour boroughs are more interested in fighting each other than in drawing that money down. However, we are straying.

Jim McMahon: Will the Minister give way?

Jake Berry: I will not, because we are straying a long way from the subject of the debate and I want to conclude my remarks.

This has been an interesting debate. I welcome the lead role that my hon. Friend the Member for Romford is taking in driving the debate on the future of the GLA and the mayoralty, and the relationship between the two. There has been no change since the 1960s. Although we cannot guarantee that any change will come, if he can command a broad coalition of boroughs across London who would like to talk to the Government about what change could look like, we will welcome those discussions.

10.34 am

Andrew Rosindell: This has been a worthwhile debate. I hope that colleagues who represent London constituencies will take the time to read some of the interesting, useful arguments put forward on a range of topics and that they, too, will think about how London should develop.

I have thought deeply about this. I have lived in London/Essex my entire life and I care about our great UK capital city, which I want to be a success as a global city that attracts investment, trade and tourism. However, I also want this region of the UK to be seen as a place where people live, based on communities in towns and villages. The identities of those areas are really important to local people. I welcome the Minister’s offer to have a meeting to talk about how we can take this agenda forward. I hope we can organise that soon.

I urge the Government to take this issue seriously. My fear is that if we do not push for change, sit together and work out a new model for how London can be governed, nothing will change, and in years’ time this will be seen as another debate where nothing really changed. I hope this is the start of that debate where we can come together and find solutions, recognising—this is the crux of my argument—that London is not just the central part. What the capital is should be defined, but there is London way beyond Greater London and the existing boundaries. That is what we must focus on. It has all changed since the ’60s, and we cannot carry on any longer with the existing structure.

Let us be radical but also consistent with what local people truly desire for their local towns, local communities and local boroughs in our great capital.

Question put and agreed to.

Resolved,

That this House has considered local government reform in Greater London.

10.37 am

Sitting suspended.
The tender documents requested that organisations bid for local extended access service in Darlington, and the other in Hartlepool and Stockton, with two lots—one to run an extended access service in each of the commissioning groups. Darlington CCG launched an invitation to tender for the extended access service in October 2017. However, in September this year the local clinical commissioning group launched a tender process to run an extended access service in the district. The tender documents requested that organisations bid to run one and a half hours of general practice each evening and a bit longer at the weekends. The bidding process is under way and I am sure the Minister will not want to say anything that might prejudice the process.

I have initiated this debate to ask some big questions. Biggest of all is this: how does privatising this service benefit local patients—the acid test for any NHS change? When local GPs work together to deliver this service, and when the local NHS has all partners collaborating so well, how can it possibly be right to bring in a new private sector provider?

Alex Cunningham (Stockton North) (Lab): I congratulate my hon. Friend, my next-door neighbour, on securing this debate. One thing that concerns me is the potential loss of good will from GPs across the Tees valley who are currently delivering the service. Does that concern him too?

Dr Williams: I will come later in my remarks to some of the reasons why the system works well at the moment, and to some of the potential threats that could arise from introducing a private sector provider.

I am on the record as having said that GPs should be employed by the NHS, and I believe that the time has come for the NHS to set up community providers to integrate GPs, community nursing, social care and community health services. GPs should be offered employment in those organisations. The fairest that I am describing today makes the case for that type of organisation stronger.

While setting out my credentials, I am also pragmatic and not dogmatic about private and voluntary sector provision within the NHS. Our local counselling services in Stockton are better for having multiple providers. Patients like getting hearing tests on the high street at Specsavers instead of going to the hospital audiology department. What I am describing today, however, is privatisation for privatisation’s sake. It is privatisation because the “rules” say privatisate, and not because anyone thinks that privatisation is good for patients. It is probably even privatisation by accident.

For me, the most important test of any change in the NHS is: how does this benefit patients? The NHS is there to improve health. I have huge respect for all the staff who work in our NHS, and I thank everyone for their efforts, but fundamentally local health services must meet the needs of local populations. How could bringing in a private GP company for an hour and a half each day possibly make things better for patients in my constituency? If there were a list of 101 things to do to...
improve the NHS in Stockton South, finding a new provider for GP extended access would not be one of them.

Children’s mental health services are in crisis and health inequalities in Stockton are the most stark in the whole country. Our local authority is struggling to deliver effective public health services because of the cuts, and waiting times for autism diagnosis for children have been four years, even though our health and wellbeing board, council and CCG have good plans to reduce that. For general practice, in some parts of Stockton South patients tell me they have to wait four weeks for a GP appointment. Fixing those things should be the priority for our CCG, not being forced to spend time and money on an unnecessary privatisation.

GP extended access is one part of the local NHS that is working well. The model has energised local GPs and, to an extent, local nurses. Eighty-five doctors and 25 nurses have worked in the service. Three years ago, before I was in Parliament, I led a workshop for GPs, and the No. 1 thing they asked me not to introduce was an extended access service. However, working together with the CCG, a model was created that people wanted to work for—one that works for staff and patients. Since GPs own the organisation that they work for, the things that matter are prioritised. The GP federation has a culture lead—an employee of the federation whose job it is to promote a happy, healthy working environment and reduce the pressure on frontline GPs. GPs working in that service are not motivated by profit. They are working as a collective and taking responsibility.

Extended access has also allowed new models of care to be tried, and pharmacist, physiotherapist and counsellor appointments are directly bookable at the weekend. The scheme is popular with patients—96% of GP and 70% of nurse appointments have been used. In short, the service works well. Although most people said at the start that it would not work, the service is popular with patients and well led. Why privatise it? What on earth could be gained? One and a half hours a day of private general practice—it is ridiculous.

More good collaborative things are happening in Hartlepool and Stockton. The local GPs are already working in partnership with the local hospital and the local ambulance service to run the local urgent care centre. Local services are integrated, everyone is talking to each other and most people are happy. Most areas would be delighted to have such a level of engagement and co-operation and such leadership. The service has been put out to tender simply because of the law. The Health and Social Care Act 2012 mandates competitive tender for certain contracts worth more than £615,000 a year.

In this case, I contend that the law is not working. It does not work for patients, it will not work for doctors or NHS leaders and I suspect it is probably not even what the Minister wants. There is hypocrisy here—a fundamental difference between what the Government are saying and what they are doing. I will quote from NHS England’s “Next steps on the NHS Five Year Forward View” document, published in March 2017, which says that it will:

> Encourage practices to work together in ‘hubs’ or networks.

Most GP surgeries will increasingly work together in primary care...hubs. This is because a combined patient population of at least 30,000-50,000 allows practices to share community nursing, mental health, and clinical pharmacy teams, expand diagnostic facilities, and pool responsibility for urgent care and extended access.”

That is what the NHS five-year forward view says will happen: GPs will work together to pool responsibility, which is exactly what is happening in my area. If private companies are invited to competitive tender for that, every GP has something to fear from the collaboration. They will do the work of setting up the services and somebody else will then come in and run them.

The Minister’s colleague, the Minister for Health, the hon. Member for North East Cambridgeshire (Stephen Barclay), recently gave evidence to the Health and Social Care Committee inquiry into integration in the NHS. When he was asked about privatisation, he said that “there are a number of checks and balances in the system in the requirement for CCGs to consult their local populations, their health and wellbeing boards and their oversight and scrutiny committees. On top of that, there are safeguards at a national level of CCGs going through the integrated support and assurance process. Actually, there are a lot of checks and balances as to the fact that this is not privatisation.”

I ask where the checks and balances were to stop the CCG having to put these services out to tender. Why did the Minister not intervene, when it is plain to everybody that it is a ridiculous idea to bring a private company in for an hour and a half each day?

**Alex Cunningham:** What concerns me is that this tender document sounds as though it will lead to a reduction in service, and the working people who access those extra clinics and appointments will not have the same level of service that they currently do. The Minister must intervene to ensure that we at least have the level of service that we have now.

**Dr Williams:** I thank my hon. Friend for highlighting the potential risks to local patients. This is not about defending the interests of the staff who work in the service, however important they are; it is about ensuring that it is the best service for local patients.

Finally, I quote from the 2017 Conservative election manifesto: I am afraid I do not keep my own copy, but it is still available online. It says:

> “We expect GPs to come together to provide greater access”.

It also says:

> “If the current legislative landscape is either slowing implementation or preventing clear national or local accountability, we will consult and make the necessary legislative changes. This includes the NHS’s own internal market, which can fail to act in the interests of patients and creates costly bureaucracy. So we will review the operation of the internal market and, in time for the start of the 2018 financial year, we will make non-legislative changes to remove barriers to the integration of care.”

I ask, then, what the Minister has done and how he has acted to remove barriers to integration of care in Stockton.

GPs in the NHS in Darlington and in Hartlepool and Stockton are doing everything they have been asked to do by this Government and the NHS. They have organised themselves into collectives, and together they are delivering social prescribing and pharmacists in practices, promoting nursing in general practice, introducing new technologies, helping physicians’ associates and training. Those are all good things that I am sure the Minister would support. Integration works. Integration is the right strategy: collaboration, not competition.
Why privatise now, and what is the risk of a private company running this service? The tender encourages competition on price. The lower an organisation’s bid, the more likely it is to win the contract. Cutting costs means less money to pay for things such as the culture lead I mentioned, so the kindness, the looking after staff, the encouragement and the “thank you” cards go, and with them much of the goodwill they bring, which my hon. Friend the Member for Stockton North (Alex Cunningham) talked about.

Would local doctors and nurses want to work for a private organisation motivated by profit? Remember, I said that most local GPs were opposed to extended access only three years ago. Their participation has been carefully nurtured; they have ownership of the organisation delivering the service and they now really care about making it a success. How will the tender process take account of that? Today, we have doctors and nurses working in a service motivated by patient care. How can a for-profit company answerable to remote shareholders recreate that ethos? We have seen this Government’s privatisation failures over and over again, with Circle, Serco and Carillion. This Government are saying one thing about NHS collaboration, but doing another.

I have three questions for the Minister, and I will give him plenty of time to respond. First, why did he let this happen and why did he not intervene to stop it? Secondly, what is he going to do to stop this happening again in other parts of the country? What changes to the law does the Minister think would be helpful? Thirdly, how can he expect the public to trust the Tories on their new integrated care system idea if he cannot guarantee that these new multi-million pound contracts to run all the local health services will not be put out to tender in exactly the same way?

In the Minister’s response, I ask him to either defend this ridiculous privatisation of 1.5 hours of GP services a day, risking a great service being taken away from local GPs and given to a private company, or perhaps to concede that this type of privatisation—a consequence of the Conservatives’ 2012 Act—does not help patients and runs counter to the aims expressed in his party’s election manifesto, the stated aims of his ministerial colleagues and the strategy of NHS England. Maybe he will agree that the law needs to be changed. I look forward to his response.

11.16 am

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Health and Social Care (Steve Brine): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Mr Hosie—it is the first time we have done this. I congratulate the hon. Member for Stockton South (Dr Williams), who I always enjoy listening to, on securing this debate on an important issue for him as both a Member of Parliament and member of the important Health and Social Care Committee, and—as I think he is still—a practising GP.

We know that primary care literally, by definition, comes first. It has always been and always will be the bedrock of the national health service. The Secretary of State and I have made that absolutely clear, and the long-term plan, when it is published later this year, will make it even clearer. As the hon. Gentleman rightly says—I think there is unanimity—we are committed to ensuring that everyone can see their GP at a convenient time by increasing the availability of routine evening and weekend appointments. Millions of patients have already benefited thanks to our investment of some £2.4 billion into general practice by 2021. I join him in paying tribute to his colleagues for making the leap and making that available to his constituents.

We have asked all clinical commissioning groups to ensure by March next year that patients have extended access to general practice across the whole of their registered population. That includes ensuring that access is available during peak times of demand such as bank holidays, and across the Easter, Christmas and new year periods. We have made great strides in delivering extended access, with the vast majority of England now offering weekend and evening appointments. Apologies to you, Mr Hosie—this of course is a devolved matter and we are talking about the English health service. That extended access will, as the hon. Member for Stockton South rightly says, help to reduce the pressures on general practice—it is not all squeezed into the original sessions—and, importantly, to reduce pressures across the wider NHS ahead of winter, which is creeping up on us.

Good access is key to improving quality and is not just access for access’s sake. Problems with access make it harder for people to get the right care from the right person at the right time. It is a publicly funded health service and it is there for the public, and that is what the public say they want. However, for us improving access is not simply about all GPs working seven days a week or doing more of the same. There was certainly a comms failure with the 2012 Act, in that it was allowed to be presented as saying that we just wanted GPs to just do more and to work seven days a week. Many people work seven days a week—all MPs certainly do—but improving access was not just about asking GPs to do more of the same. It can be and often is about practices coming together to offer services to a larger population—I have seen it most recently at the brilliant Granta surgery in Cambridge, which does it very well—using technology in different ways to make it easier for patients to access services, and broadening the skills mix. The hon. Gentleman and I have talked about the multidisciplinary team many times. It is also about working smarter in greater partnership across the health and social care system. The Secretary of State was at Granta just last week.

The hon. Gentleman mentioned the Health and Social Care Act 2012 and asked in effect why we do not just do away with the requirement in that Act—the section 75 rules—so that CCGs are, as he says, no longer required to tender for contracts. Let me assure the hon. Gentleman and you, Mr Hosie, that any fears of privatisation of our NHS are, we think, completely groundless. I do not accept the title of the debate on the Order Paper. The Government are fully committed to the NHS as a public service that is free at the point of need, as it has been since day one in 1948—70 years ago this year, of course—whether care is provided by NHS organisations, as the vast majority is, or by the private, voluntary or social enterprise sectors. That guideline applies absolutely the case today. The mechanisms for deciding who provides what service may vary, but the basic structure of our NHS remains exactly the same. The
key question is, and will remain, the pragmatic one: how do we best secure the outcomes that we want for patients and the best possible value for the taxpayer? I completely respect the fact that the hon. Gentleman started his speech by saying exactly that. He is spot on, of course.

We should avoid the blanket assumption that one form or other of provision is always the best or worst, as the evidence does not support that sort of sweeping conclusion, which the hon. Gentleman understands. As long as patients receive care that is high quality, timely and free at the point of use, the status of the provider is of little if any significance. That has been the policy of successive Governments for many years. It was certainly the policy of the last Labour Government and was what Tony Blair believed when he was in office. I know that many Opposition Back Benchers do not share the ideology of those on their current Front Bench, which is to make those sweeping conclusions that one form of provision is bad and one good. Where healthcare is free at the point of use, people are not as concerned about who provides the care as we think and often hear in the House. The British social attitudes survey showed that 43% of people had no preference whatever between a private provider, an NHS provider and a not-for-profit organisation.

A clear framework for public sector procurement is both necessary and, we think, desirable, just as it has started his speech by saying exactly that. He is spot on, of course.

Dr Paul Williams: The Minister has said that the CCG puts things out to procurement when it decides that that is in the interest of patients. Do I understand from his words that the local CCG had the option within the law of not going out to procurement on this service?

Steve Brine: I might have to send the hon. Gentleman a note on that, but I will repeat what I said, just for the purposes of accuracy—I know he is seeing the relevant Member for Stockton South—rightly making the decisions about how best to ensure that people in their areas have access to a GP when it suits them. Bids for local extended access GP services are currently being closely assessed with a view to the contract starting in April 2019. I have faith that those local commissioners will award this contract in a way that, as I have set out, improves access and quality for patients. Let me say that very clearly: I have faith that those local commissioners will award this contract in a way that I think the hon. Member for Stockton South will find satisfactory.

Alex Cunningham: I wish to push this point. I know the Minister said that he might have to send my hon. Friend a note, but in putting the service out to tender, the CCG either is acting within the law or is not. Did it have the option within the law not to put this particular service out to tender? We need a very clear understanding of that.

Steve Brine: Let me repeat that the local, clinically led CCG absolutely decided that it was in the interests of patients and taxpayers to look at a range of potential providers for the service that they wanted to be provided. That is the process that it is going through. The hon. Member for Stockton South rightly said that he would not expect me to wade into the middle of the procurement process. I cannot do that, but I will say that sensible, dynamic commissioning will be central to the NHS meeting the challenges that it faces today and in the future despite the commitment to increase the funding by £20.5 billion a year. That is vital to ensure that the NHS delivers on our triple aim of improving quality of care, cost control and population health which, as I am the Public Health Minister and absolutely focused on prevention, is one of my and the new Secretary of State’s key priorities. It is central. To achieve that triple aim, NHS commissioning will need to continue to develop as it has done since its inception. NHS England has designed a new commissioning capability programme to support commissioning systems. The programme provides tailored support delivered through place-based solutions to equip NHS commissioners with the skills they need to deliver on the challenges of today and the future.

Let me stress one of the fundamental principles of the 2012 reforms of the NHS—I served for many weeks on the Standing Committee that considered the Bill. That principle is delegating power away from Whitehall and Ministers such as me, who come and go with political cycles, to local clinical commissioning groups. They are led by fantastic GPs and other local health experts, who are best placed to make the important decisions that matter to local people. Darlington CCG and the Hartlepool and Stockton-on-Tees CCG are rightly making the decisions about how best to ensure that people in their areas have access to a GP when it suits them. Bids for local extended access GP services are currently being closely assessed with a view to the contract starting in April 2019. I have faith that those local commissioners will award this contract in a way that, as I have set out, improves access and quality for patients. Let me say that very clearly: I have faith that those local commissioners will award this contract in a way that I think the hon. Member for Stockton South will find satisfactory.

Dr Williams rose—

Steve Brine: We still have two minutes, so I will let the hon. Gentleman come in again.

Dr Williams: If the Minister had been asked for his advice as the Minister with responsibility for primary care by the CCG about whether it should put this out to tender, what would his response have been?
Steve Brine: My response would have been that the CCG needs to act in accordance with the law, with the Act, and I believe it is doing that.

Let me close by saying that I know the hon. Gentleman, and possibly his neighbour, the hon. Member for Stockton North (Alex Cunningham), are meeting regional representatives of NHS England later this week—probably on Friday, when they get back to their constituencies. Ultimately, these decisions are for the local NHS, not for Ministers. We merely set the legislative framework. They are absolutely the best people to discuss the concerns of the hon. Member for Stockton South. As I said, I have faith that the local commissioners will award this contract in such a way that he will be happy that it improves access and quality for local patients, as I have set out.

Question put and agreed to.

11.28 am

Sitting suspended.

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East Coast Main Line Investment

[Albert Owen in the Chair]

2.30 pm

Catherine McKinnell (Newcastle upon Tyne North) (Lab): I beg to move,

That this House has considered East Coast Mainline investment.

It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Mr Owen, not least because I have attempted to secure a debate on this issue for some time in my capacity as chair of the all-party parliamentary group on the east coast main line. I also represent one of the constituencies served by this vital route.

I am grateful to right hon. and hon. Members for attending this debate during an important Opposition day debate in the main Chamber on universal credit and social care funding, to which I would ordinarily want to contribute. Newcastle has been particularly hard hit by the roll-out of universal credit, for which it was a pilot area, and by the social care crisis. Sadly, the reality is that none of us can be in two places at once. I declare an interest: like many hon. Members, I use the east coast main line on a weekly basis, so I can personally testify to the pressing and increasing need for investment in the route.

I am proud of the pivotal role that Newcastle and the wider north-east have played in the development of rail travel through George Stephenson, the father of the railways, who was married at Newburn church in my constituency, and his son Robert and others, who pioneered their world-leading technology from our region through the industrial revolution. Whether it was the Stockton and Darlington railway, the Stephenson gauge, Locomotion No. 1 and the Rocket, which were both built at Stephenson’s Forth Street works in Newcastle or William Hedley’s earlier Puffing Billy, the world’s oldest surviving steam engine that ran between Wylam in Northumberland and Lemington in my constituency, the north-east’s contribution to Britain’s railways has been second to none.

That impressive history was celebrated this summer during the Great Exhibition of the North, which was held across the region and included the sadly temporary return of Stephenson’s Rocket to the region.

Chi Onwurah (Newcastle upon Tyne Central) (Lab): I thank my hon. Friend for securing the debate and for her excellent opening, which focuses on our proud history in transport and particularly in railways. As she said, it is unfortunate that Stephenson’s Rocket apparently had to return to London. Stephenson’s notebooks were recently found in York. Does she agree that there is now an excellent opportunity to bring them back to the city that she proudly celebrates?

Catherine McKinnell: That is off-point with regard to the east coast main line, but it is an excellent suggestion that we should pursue. I am sure that there would be a lot of support for bringing home—back to Newcastle and the north-east—more of what is rightly ours when it comes to our contribution to engineering and railway history in Britain.
Alex Cunningham (Stockton North) (Lab): We are extremely proud of our railway heritage, particularly in Stockton, from where the first passenger train left on its journey to Darlington. Across the country, people are bringing heritage lines back into use, but we do not need that on Teesside, because our trains and lines are so decrepit, old and run-down that they ought to be confined to history. Does my hon. Friend agree that, although we desperately need more investment in the north-east line, we also need to cover the branch lines so that the people of Teesside and beyond have proper services to get to the main line?

Catherine McKinnell: I absolutely agree. I will make the case that investment is not only about the infrastructure of the vital east coast spine that runs up and down our country, but about the major impact that that would have on all the contributing branch lines and communities that rely on that infrastructure and the infrastructure that connects to it.

Karen Lee (Lincoln) (Lab): I represent Lincoln, which was promised six extra train services. We have one train to London in the morning at half seven, and one train back at six minutes past seven in the evening. Other than that, everybody has to change at Newark—it is a nightmare; I park at Newark.

I have heard through the grapevine—even though I am the MP—that we are not now getting those extra trains. Apparently there is a problem with the trains and the timetables. Does my hon. Friend agree that I should have been properly informed about that, along with other people, and that a formal announcement should be made?

Catherine McKinnell: My hon. Friend has put her concerns firmly on the record. The Minister may wish to refer to them at the end of the debate. Otherwise, I am sure that she will make her concerns about the issue known again.

As well as celebrating our railway of the past, this debate is about our railway of the future. The north-east can celebrate its proud role in that too, including through the manufacture of the new Azuma trains at Hitachi’s Newton Aycliffe plant. That is the east coast main line of tomorrow, which is what we must focus on today.

The east coast main line is a critical piece of our national rail infrastructure. It is one of the country’s most strategically important transport routes and enables more than 80 million passenger journeys a year, according to Network Rail. Between Berwick-upon-Tweed and London, the east coast main line carries more than 58 million tonnes of freight annually, equivalent to 6.9 million lorry loads. The Consortium of East Coast Main Line Authorities has estimated that the local area served by the route contributes £300 billion to the UK economy every year—and that figure doubles if London is factored in to the calculation.

Mr Stephen Hepburn (Jarrow) (Lab): I congratulate my hon. Friend on securing this timely and important debate. Does she not think it ironic that we have those new Hitachi trains, but they cannot go at their maximum speed because the lines are decades old? We are getting new trains, but the lines do not match them.

Catherine McKinnell: I would go further than my hon. Friend and say that it is not only ironic but completely unacceptable. That is part of the case that I want to make to the Minister.

The east coast main line is a significant employer in its own right, as more than 3,000 people work for London North Eastern Railway. Trains that use the east coast main line operate as far north as Inverness and as far south as London, and one third of the UK’s population live within 20 minutes of the east coast main line, so the quality of the service and the capacity of the route has a real impact across the country.

The east coast main line is the fastest and most environmentally sustainable way to connect many of those locations, and enables cities in the north of England—or the northern powerhouse, to use the Government’s terminology—to do business elsewhere in the country and with one another. When the railway works, its key city centre to city centre journey times compare favourably with air travel, which allows slots at airports to be reserved for connectivity into international economies. The east coast main line should always win hands down against road travel as an attractive alternative to slow-moving traffic and motorway driving, with all the air quality issues that they bring.

The line does not just facilitate the famous Anglo-Scottish trains of past and present that travel to and from London, but a multiplicity of other journeys that utilise every part of the route, such as Edinburgh to Leeds, Newcastle to Birmingham, Darlington to Bristol, Middlesbrough to Manchester and Stansted airport to Leicester. The east coast main line and this debate are important not just to the grand cathedral stations of King’s Cross, Edinburgh, York and Newcastle, but to the other stations that serve commuter towns and larger villages across the route. When all those connecting lines are taken into account, that includes a far bigger swathe of the country than just those places immediately near the east coast main line.

For all those reasons, the east coast main line is a national asset to be prized and nurtured, not taken for granted. That is why I established the all-party parliamentary group to focus on the issue earlier this year, so hon. Members from both Houses could campaign together to secure investment in the route for an improved passenger experience, for capacity and reliability, and for shorter journey times.

The APPG is also looking at the economic growth that could be unlocked in the areas served by the east coast main line if those improvements are delivered, and at the future operation of the route, which has been beset by significant problems over the past decade. Given that the APPG’s vice chairs are the hon. Members for Stevenage (Stephen McPartland), for Cleethorpes (Martin Vickers) and for Edinburgh West (Christine Jardine), there is clearly strong cross-party and cross-country interest in this issue.

Of course, the Minister here today is well aware of the APPG’s existence, having attended one of our meetings back in June, for which we are grateful, and having corresponded with me since. I am quite sure that we will remain in contact in the months ahead.

I am acutely aware that the performance issues facing east coast main line passengers do not come close to the frankly catastrophic service issues faced by people who...
had the misfortune of having to use a number of other lines over the summer, including Arriva’s Northern Rail passengers and those on the Thameslink, Southern and Great Northern routes.

However, there are also real problems on the east coast main line. The latest performance measures published by Network Rail indicate that in the year to 15 September, just 75.2% of trains on the east coast main line, under the former franchise and the current operator, arrived within 10 minutes of their scheduled time. That is well short of the national figure of 86% and even further a drift of the target figure, which is 88%.

Over the same period, almost 9% of east coast main line trains were cancelled or classed as being “significantly late”, against an England and Wales performance of 4.6%. Of course, this issue is most serious for those communities not directly served by the line—for them, reliability is absolutely crucial if connections to adjoining routes are actually going to work.

Although passenger satisfaction data for LNER is not yet available, the spring 2018 figures from the independent transport user watchdog, Transport Focus, found an “overall satisfaction with the journey” rating for Virgin Trains East Coast of 87%—the worst score on the east coast main line route for five years. It will be very interesting to see what happens to that figure when Transport Focus publishes its autumn 2018 results, which will incorporate LNER’s performance for the first time.

I am seriously concerned that the quality of the service currently being provided simply does not “sell” the line, or the local communities that it is supposed to serve. Why would anyone from overseas or from elsewhere in the UK want to come back to places they have visited on the route, or do business or invest there, if they have had a poor travel experience, as is far too often the case? Similarly, how can we possibly persuade more people to stop using their cars, to reduce congestion and improve poor air quality, if they simply cannot rely on the railway to get them from A to B on time and at a reasonable price, whether it is for business or leisure?

Alex Cunningham: I am grateful to my hon. Friend for giving way to me again. She is championing people along the line. Across the line and the area, there is very poor access for disabled people—particularly at Billingham, where they cannot get on to a train at all. Will she join me in encouraging the Minister to back the application for a grant to give disabled people in the Billingham area proper access to rail services, from Teesside to Darlington and beyond?

Catherine McKinnell: My hon. Friend makes a vital point very well. I absolutely support that call—indeed, I support the call for such improvements to be made right up and down the line. That is something we should all focus on.

I am sure that many hon. Members want to raise such concerns directly with LNER at the drop-in briefing that I will host next month, and that they will wish to update colleagues on their plans. That briefing is also an opportunity to put to LNER the case for some of the improvements that we would like to work together to secure.

It would be wrong to lay all of the problems that I have outlined today at the door of LNER, or indeed that of Virgin, given that the latest performance figures published by Network Rail show that some 58% of the delays and cancellations on the route over the last year were caused by Network Rail itself. Those figures are a clear reflection of the east coast main line’s ageing and unreliable infrastructure. I suggest again to the Minister, as I have done at the APPG meeting that he attended and in writing, that that infrastructure is in urgent need of improvement or replacement, including of track, signalling and overhead power lines on the electrified sections. Also, far greater resilience is required in bad weather, which the rail networks of many other countries that have far more challenging climatic conditions than we do appear able to cope with.

Julian Sturdy (York Outer) (Con): I thank the hon. Lady for giving way. She is making a powerful argument, and I agree about the need to improve the infrastructure. There is a lot of talk about overhead cables and track, but does she agree that, given the new rolling stock, we should also look to invest in new digital technology, such as in-cab signalling? The Government have talked about bringing that forward, but there is no timetable for doing so. Does she agree that we should be looking at a timetable for that digital technology?

Catherine McKinnell: Absolutely. The hon. Gentleman has put that clearly on the record, and it would be good if the Minister referred to it in his response to the debate. Indeed, it is also an issue that the APPG can take up as part of the wider call to ensure that on the east coast main line we have the railway for the future and the investment that is required to deliver it.

Of course, the infrastructure-related poor performance on the east coast main line is not really surprising, given that the last significant large-scale improvement on the route was electrification to Edinburgh, which was completed back in 1991. To some of us, that feels like yesterday, but it is almost three decades ago.

In contrast, the west coast main line benefited from a major upgrade in the period between 1998 and 2009, at a cost of £9 billion in today’s prices, accelerating journey times and offering greater passenger and freight capacity. That has resulted in at least 20% more passengers on the west coast main line, which is evidence that investment in existing rail infrastructure works.

So it is clear that the east coast main line, with its creaking infrastructure, is not currently fit for purpose and the demands that are already being made on it, but what about the demands of the future? Even without High Speed 2, forecasts predict that passenger demand on long-distance services will increase dramatically in the coming decades. For example, it has been estimated that between 2012 and 2043 there will be growth in demand of up to 175% for London to Edinburgh journeys, up to 145% for London to Leeds journeys and up to 62% for Leeds to Newcastle journeys. Therefore, increased capacity and, crucially, increased reliability will be vital for the east coast main line in the coming years, requiring short to medium-term investment regardless of any plans for HS2.

However, it is crucial to highlight that HS2 does not remove the need for longer-term investment in the east coast main line, as the benefits of HS2 phase 2b will be
fully realised only if there is an associated investment in the east coast main line. Also, as I am sure the Minister is well aware, the northern part of the line needs improvement so that HS2 trains can operate on it at high speeds. The east coast main line needs to be fast, reliable and resilient, day in and day out, as HS2, which aims to achieve Japanese-style timekeeping at a level that the east coast main line does not even aspire to yet, comes into use. Passengers must experience the same service when HS2 runs on the east coast main line as they do on the rest of the HS2 route. Of course, the far northern, central and southern parts of the east coast main line, which will not be served by HS2, also need such longer-term investment, so that they do not become more remote in terms of connectivity and prosperity.

However, the Consortium of East Coast Main Line Authorities has made it very clear to me that the Department for Transport’s current proposals are insufficient to ensure that the east coast main line is HS2-ready by 2033, which is the point when the link between HS2 and the east coast main line is intended to be in place.

I know that on 23 July the Prime Minister made a somewhat unexpected announcement to “confirm an investment of up to £780 million for major upgrades to the East Coast Main Line from 2019, to be completed in the early 2020s”, which would give passengers “more seats and faster, more frequent journeys”.

Lilian Greenwood (Nottingham South) (Lab): My hon. Friend is making a passionate case on behalf of her constituents, and indeed on behalf of all the constituencies that rely on the east coast main line.

Does my hon. Friend agree that part of the problem is that over a long period the Government have not invested sufficiently in the rail infrastructure of the north-east? For example, we know that in 2016-17 transport spending per head in the north-east was just £291 per person, compared with £944 per head in London. However, what is more concerning is that even if we project forward and look at the figures for the future, as the Institute for Public Policy Research North has done, the north-east will remain in second place among the regions and far behind places such as London.

Catherine McKinnell: I absolutely agree with my hon. Friend, and I have huge respect for her grasp of detail as Chair of the Select Committee on Transport. I thank her for her support in this debate. She has highlighted some of the issues specific to the north-east, whereas I have been working hard to speak for the whole east coast main line route and make the case for it as national infrastructure, but I agree with what she has said and I am grateful to her for putting on the record some stark figures that need to be addressed by the Government.

Going back to the Government’s surprise announcement of £780 million of investment, somebody considerably more cynical than me might suggest that the timing and content of that pledge was more to do with the Cabinet’s visit to the north-east that day and the pressing need to announce something north-east-friendly. Indeed, they do need more north-east-friendly announcements; my hon. Friend the Member for Nottingham South (Lilian Greenwood) has pointed out the disparity in the investment that goes into the region. That concern is possibly backed up by the fact that it took several days for the Department for Transport to confirm what the funding would be used for. However, as was eventually confirmed in writing following the Minister’s attendance at the all-party parliamentary group on the east coast main line, it is intended that this control period 6 investment will include power supply upgrades between Doncaster and Edinburgh, a new junction near Peterborough, a new platform at Stevenage, and track layout improvements at King’s Cross—improvements that are mainly paid for by necessary maintenance and renewal expenditure.

Let me be clear: any investment in the east coast main line is welcome, given the scale and nature of the improvements required. However, the Minister will also know that Network Rail published its east coast main line route study covering the section from London to Berwick-upon-Tweed, which contained a long list of potential investment projects or investment opportunities that would deliver much-needed improvements to the east coast main line. Most have been known about for some time and have been mooted repeatedly, including some that have not been delivered in Network Rail’s control period 5, 2014 to 2019. The Consortium of East Coast Main Line Authorities estimates that the route requires at least £3 billion of investment to fulfil Network Rail’s proposals, but there is no indication of where the remainder of the funding to pay for these projects will come from, either via Government funding or third-party investment. Meanwhile, Network Rail’s renewal and maintenance fund for control period 6, 2019 to 2024, is barely enough to stand still, replacing items on a like-for-like basis.

I acknowledge that, as is made clear in Network Rail’s route study, “recent rail industry developments” have seen a shift away from the historical model of railway infrastructure improvements being provided and funded centrally, via national Governments and Network Rail raising capital against its asset base. However, as a reclassified publicly funded body, Network Rail can longer finance enhancements through financial markets. A welcome devolution of funding and decision making on transport infrastructure means that more local, regional or sub-national bodies—such as LEPs, combined authorities, and Transport for the North—have been tasked with defining the railway needs in their area and applying for Government funding or attracting third-party investment. However, the Network Rail east coast main line route study states:

“Overall, this means that improvements in rail infrastructure should not be seen as an automatic pipeline of upgrades awaiting delivery; rather, they are choices that may or may not be taken forward depending on whether they meet the needs of rail users, provide a value for money investment, and are affordable.”

I understand that could mean the Treasury taking final decisions on individual rail improvements in England on a case-by-case basis. I fear that does not bode well for the comprehensive, coherent programme of infrastructure improvements that I and others believe is required for the east coast main line route. To that end, it would be helpful to hear what the Minister’s plans are for working with the Scottish Government to secure that investment right across the line.

Chi Onwurah: I thank my hon. Friend for being generous with her time, and for the points that she is making. Specifically regarding the way in which the
Treasury assesses opportunities for investment in north-east infrastructure, we have heard how discriminated against that region has historically been. Will the Minister look at the definition under which that assessment is made, taking into account the economic value of infrastructure investment in the north-east region and how it contributes to delivering a less unequal society?

Catherine McKinnell: Again, I echo my hon. Friend’s comments, and I thank her for putting on record some of the specific requirements of the north-east as part of the wider east coast main line infrastructure demands that we are making.

Lilian Greenwood: My hon. Friend is being generous with her time. Is she aware that the Transport Committee’s report into rail infrastructure investment called on the Government to do more to reflect the fact that the way they deal with business cases disadvantages places like the north-east that are in need of economic regeneration? Does she share my disappointment that the Government’s response to that report does not take on board the Committee’s recommendations, which might help to ensure that such places get their fair share of transport funding?

Catherine McKinnell: Absolutely, because apart from the other issues that have been raised, businesses need certainty about infrastructure and the quality of any improvements on a route before they will bring new investment and jobs to communities that depend on that line. It is not clear how that will be delivered under the current system, or whether we can expect a series of unexpected announcements from Government Ministers, such as the announcement that was made over the summer. Although that announcement was welcome, I would be interested to hear whether the Minister believes that the issues now arising with the long-awaited Azuma trains, which have been 10 years in the planning, reflect the piecemeal, seemingly un-strategic and ad hoc approach to investment in the east coast main line’s infrastructure. Last month, it was reported that ageing track-side equipment on the line north of York meant that the electro-diesel trains would have to operate only on diesel on that part of the route, travelling much more slowly than their promised speed, with all the air quality issues that would create. In Hitachi’s words, “There are a number of 30-year old signalling systems on the East Coast line which require modifying to operate with modern electric trains”.

I am acutely aware that there are myriad issues affecting the east coast main line that I have not touched on today, including the never-ending franchising sagas that were covered so well in the Transport Committee’s recent excellent report; the future operation of the route; the Government’s ongoing proposals for a new east coast partnership, which the Transport Committee has described as an experiment; and how any of this fits into the root and branch rail review announced by the Secretary of State last month and re-announced by the Secretary of State last week. However, I hope I have made it clear that the east coast main line, one of the country’s most important transport routes, is in urgent need of a significant, coherent programme of investment for the short, medium and long term if it is to be fit for purpose now and into the future.

Such an investment programme would include improving the resilience and reliability of the east coast main line. It would include improving signalling, power supply and tracks, so that the Azumas can run at their full speed, offering faster train journeys and better connections. It would include improving capacity, particularly between York and Newcastle, for the east coast main line. HS2 and Northern Powerhouse Rail. Ideally, it would ensure that HS2 services can continue north from Newcastle to Edinburgh, both from the start of phase 2b and in the longer term as an upgraded route north of Newcastle. Such an investment programme would deliver real returns for the whole country. Independent research undertaken on behalf of the Consortium of East Coast Main Line Authorities estimates that the scale of investment required and subsequent improvements to passenger services could generate more than £5 billion in extra GDP, or an additional £9 billion per year when combined with HS2 phase 2 and the link to the east coast main line in the York area.

I look forward to the Minister’s response, and to hearing what he believes to be the main issues that the east coast main line faces and, therefore, what his future priorities might be in terms of investment. I would like to hear what additional money for investing in the route could, and will, be made available for devolved bodies to bid for, and at what point the Government will enter into meaningful dialogue involving Network Rail and key stakeholders along the route to develop a series of interventions to ensure that the east coast main line is fit for purpose, both now and in the future. Crucially, I would like to hear how he intends to ensure that a significant, coherent programme of east coast main line investment is delivered.

3 pm

Martin Vickers (Cleethorpes) (Con): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Mr Owen. I congratulate the hon. Member for Newcastle upon Tyne Central (Chi Onwurah) on securing this timely and important debate. Sadly, my constituency does not lie on the direct route of the east coast main line, but it is heavily reliant on it, as am I. Looking around, most of the Members in the Chamber will be very familiar with LNER, as it now is, as we go to and from our constituencies.

As the hon. Lady rightly said, the east coast main line is vital to the economies of the eastern spine of the country, but it is also important to those communities that lie off the main line. Quite simply, I cannot get home without using the east coast main line, but sadly I then have to use TransPennine. It is perfectly fine—the only problem is that it takes 65 minutes to do 50 miles, which is not exactly what we expect in the 21st century.

The hon. Lady rightly focused on the history of Darlington and the north-east in the development of the railways. My constituency includes Immingham, which along with Grimsby is part of the largest port complex in the UK by tonnage. The ports of Immingham and Grimsby were developed by the Manchester, Sheffield and Lincolnshire Railway, or the MS&LR. It was affectionately known as “Mucky, Slow and Late”. Nowadays we get much cleaner trains, but they are not much faster. To be fair, they are usually on time, but they are not exactly express.

If the Minister was visiting Immingham, I would suspect that happens, as with most ministerial visits, I would get a call saying, “Can you meet me at Doncaster?”
That is because they appreciate how difficult it is to get to the east-coast communities from the main line. The same applies to Scunthorpe, Skegness, Boston and other towns. The coastal communities are vital. They need revitalising and new industry. To get that, they need good transport connections. I suspect that if the Minister was coming to Immingham tomorrow, even in his Department people would not know that Habrough station is two miles from the port of Immingham. I would again get the call asking to meet at Doncaster.

We have recently secured for my constituency the Greater Grimsby town deal, which has great potential to revitalise a fairly left-behind coastal community. Returning to the point I made a moment or two ago, to do that it is vital that we have transport connections. Most importantly, we need a direct train service to King’s Cross.

Kelvin Hopkins (Luton North) (Ind): I regret that I was unable to be here for the beginning of the debate, but I support everything the hon. Member for Newcastle upon Tyne North (Catherine McKinnell) said. I have made a number of specific suggestions for upgrading and improving the east coast main line, particularly the southern half of it, that would make possible the restoration of direct fast services from King’s Cross to Grimsby and Cleethorpes. Should the hon. Member for Cleethorpes (Martin Vickers) not be demanding that as of now?

Martin Vickers: The hon. Gentleman regularly comes to the all-party parliamentary group on rail, which I chair. I am very familiar with the proposals that he has been championing for a number of years. I am demanding now and have been demanding ever since I arrived here that more investment goes into the routes that serve not only my constituency, but other routes off the main lines.

I was rather disappointed to hear what the hon. Member for Lincoln (Karen Lee) said. She said she was lucky to have one direct train. We have got no direct trains, and we have not had any since British Rail ended them in 1992. I was rather disappointed to hear that the expected increase in trains through to Lincoln is in some doubt.

Karen Lee: It is not happening.

Martin Vickers: I am very disappointed to hear that. I put three alternatives that the Minister could consider in my notes, and one of them was to extend one or two of those new services to Lincoln through to Grimsby and Cleethorpes. Given what the hon. Lady is saying, it might not be possible.

The Minister will be aware that an open-access operator has shown an interest and has previously been in negotiations with the Office of Road and Rail about direct services. That is yet again on hold. I understand that a review is taking place on access charges for open-access operators. I can understand the logic of that, but it creates further delay. Earlier this year, Grand Central was intending to put an application in to run four direct services from King’s Cross through to Cleethorpes via Doncaster and Scunthorpe, but that is now on hold.

Alex Sobel (Leeds North West) (Lab/Co-op): Although the hon. Gentleman is outlining some of the difficulties he has in getting direct services to his constituency, I am pleased that the new publicly run LNER has just announced that it will extend direct services to Harrogate, which would increase the number of trains stopping in my constituency from one a day to six a day. That clearly shows that publicly run rail can deliver.

Martin Vickers: I was not intending to embark on a pro or anti-nationalisation debate, but I remind the hon. Gentleman that since privatisation—I cannot remember, and the Minister can probably give the exact figure—hundreds of millions of pounds from the private sector has been invested in the rail network. The simple reality is that if we nationalise the rail network, which I sincerely hope we do not, British Rail or whatever we choose to call it would be very low down on the list of demands on the Treasury. Do we want money for the health service, schools and 1,001 other things? The simple fact is that there would be a spiralling down, just as there was in the 1970s and 1980s.

To conclude, I urge the Minister to meet me to discuss further how we can get over the immediate problems and look forward to a direct service along the east coast main line serving my constituency and the neighbouring constituency of Grimsby. I ask him not to say, as many as other Ministers have over the past few years, “When we get HS2, there will be more capacity on the east coast main line, so you will be able to get a service through to Cleethorpes.” I am afraid that that timescale is simply not acceptable, even if it is 2033 or thereabouts when HS2 comes along. If a week is a long time in politics, 15 years must be generations. I urge the Minister to look again at the economic arguments for the regeneration of an area that has just been granted a unique town deal status by the Government. We need improved road and rail networks. I am fully supportive of improvements to the east coast main line, but only if they can in addition provide direct services to Cleethorpes.

3.8 pm

Mr Stephen Hepburn (Jarrow) (Lab): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Mr Owen. I repeat my earlier comments about my hon. Friend the Member for Newcastle upon Tyne North (Catherine McKinnell), who managed to secure this extremely necessary and timely debate. At the outset, I give big thanks to the staff of the east coast main line, which we all use regularly, for their hard and excellent work and courtesy at all times.

Like many of my colleagues, Members from other parties and Members of the other place, I am a regular traveller on east coast rail. We travel regularly with each other. Our constituents also use the line to go to work or to visit friends or family to keep in contact. The one thing we have in common—I am convinced about this—is that we believe the east coast rail line and the trains on it should be in public hands. It is in desperate need of investment.

Reference has already been made to the Cabinet meeting held in July, which was nothing but a gimmick. Reference was made to the advantages of privatisation, and we laughed when the Cabinet could not get back to London on time because the trains were delayed because of the chaos on the east coast rail line.

Privatisation is a joke. Three times in recent history, certainly since I have been in Parliament, the line has been in the hands of the private sector and has failed.
Its only successful time was from 2009 to 2015 when Labour nationalised it and it returned £1 billion to the public coffers in the Treasury. On numerous occasions, both the Transport Committee and the Public Accounts Committee have criticised the services, but Ministers have unfortunately ignored the criticisms. The clear message from taxpayers and passengers and from this House and its Committees is that privatisation is bad for our rail system.

There is a broader argument for investment in the east coast rail line. Everybody agrees that this country is running an imbalanced economy. It is too focused on London and the south-east at the expense of the north-east. The east coast rail line could be a solution. It could be used as a driver to boost economic growth. House of Commons figures show that under 3% of Government transport funding has been spent in the north-east since 2012. As has already been pointed out, that is the lowest of all the English regions by far. For rail spending it is even worse, with over 15 times more being spent in London compared with the whole north-east.

Research has shown that an investment of only £3 billion over the next decade could boost the north-east economy by £9 billion if that investment went into the east coast rail line. Why do we not do that? Ideology has taken over the Government rather than practical measures to try to improve the north-east.

I hope the Minister will address a couple of questions when he replies to the debate. First, following the 2013 announcement of the proposed privatisation that took place just before the general election in 2015, Ministers boasted of the benefits of privatisation and how it would lead to increased investment. Do they now admit that that was wrong? Secondly, fares have been put up year after year under privatisation with the promise of improvements. Where are the improvements? I travel on the line weekly, as lots of people do, and we have not seen the improvements. Thirdly, the Government continually state that they are undertaking the biggest investment in rail since Victorian times. Well, it is certainly not happening in the north-east of England or on the east coast main line. I look forward to the Minister’s response.

3.13 pm

John Grogan (Keighley) (Lab): I had not intended to speak, Mr Owen, but I am inspired by the speeches and by the mover of the motion, my hon. Friend the Member for Newcastle upon Tyne North (Catherine McKinnell). She spoke with great passion and clarity about how she spoke, Mr Owen, but I am inspired by the speeches and

Lilian Greenwood: Before my hon. Friend goes on to ask questions, does he agree with me that it is important to remember that today is the anniversary of the accident at Hatfield, which occurred when the infrastructure was privatised under Railtrack? As a result of that accident, the infrastructure was brought back into the public sector under Network Rail. Should we not remember that on 17 October 2000, four people lost their lives and 70 were injured? We saw then the dangers of putting ideology and profits ahead of running a safe railway.

John Grogan: We should certainly remember that anniversary. Regardless of ideology, one achievement of Network Rail over the intervening period, under all parties, has been to put a much higher emphasis on safety on our railways, and we should never lose that again.

On my questions for the Minister, is there not a strong case for a period of stability on the east coast main line? As we have heard, we have a promise of some investment from the Government, but we really need a period of stability so that people know where they stand. Ministers have mentioned the east coast partnership, but they have given very little detail. We have no idea who will be involved in that partnership. Will Network Rail be involved? Will it be a privatised operator?

For the period of this Parliament, should it last until 2022, it would be welcome if the Government were to say that the service will be run as it is now: a directly run state-operated company with Network Rail. The Minister should be very cautious about disrupting the system yet again. There are other operators on the east coast main line who write to me to ask whether they will be involved in the partnership; there are other franchisees and open-access operators and so on.

Civil servants might put the next possible option in front of the Minister when the best possible option is, as my hon. Friend the Member for Jarrow mentioned, what happened in the period between 2009 and 2015. During that sustained period, the line was run for public service in the public sector. The stats went up, reliability went up and £1 billion was paid into the public coffers. The line could be a public sector comparator. From the Government’s point of view, it would be a good thing over the next five years to look at evidence-based policy.

We have heard a little about extra trains to Harrogate and Lincoln. Are they happening or not? Extra trains to Middlesbrough were promised. Seven a day to Bradford from next May were promised. Will those trains definitely run? Can I put in my diary for 1 May next year that I shall be there watching as seven trains from Bradford, rather than the one, go on that line?

Can the Minister tell us a little more about the Azuma trains? We have heard about the problems of electromagnetic interference with signals—it sounds like science fiction. Are Ministers getting a grip of that?
When will that problem be solved? Will the Minister be able to say a little more on that this side of Christmas or in the new year?

I do not want to speak for long, but I want to say that the Labour party looks forward to government. We look forward to the main franchisee, the east coast main line, being run in the public sector with Network Rail, with all the co-ordination and efficiency that that will bring. From time to time, I raise the question of open-access operators with shadow Ministers, because there are open-access operators on the east coast main line. Hull Trains and Grand Central have re-linked towns such as Halifax to the east coast main line, and First is planning to bring in an open-access operator in 2021 to Edinburgh.

We can afford to be magnanimous as a new Labour Government. We should also recognise that just as the BBC is a great public service broadcaster but benefits from challenge from Channel 4 and the commercial sector, at the margin we should be confident in our belief in public sector efficiency, and still allow challenge in a 98% or 99% publicly owned sector.

I used to represent Selby, where Hull Trains identified a gap in the market and provided a service. A big national operator will not always be quite as fleet of foot as we might want. In thinking about how to change the railways we must give more of a role to local authorities, for example. However, there should not just be one decision maker in Whitehall deciding on routes. I hope for assurances on that matter from the Labour Front Bench.

Several hon. Members rose—

Albert Owen (in the Chair): Order. I remind hon. Members that I shall call the Front-Bench speakers promptly at 3.30. The Minister may want to leave time at the end for the hon. Member for Newcastle upon Tyne North to wind up.

3.20 pm

Karen Lee (Lincoln) (Lab): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Mr Owen. I, too, want to start by thanking the hard-working staff on the east coast main line. They are always friendly and as helpful as they can be. They take a lot of stick, because it is not a very good service, and they deal with that in a positive way. I aim no criticism at them at all.

Like many of my constituents, I rely on the east coast main line, which connects Lincoln to the rest of the UK. Along with those people, I have been greatly concerned that it has once again come to be in a position of such uncertainty. Since June, the east coast main line has been temporarily run under the publicly-owned LNER, after Virgin-Stagecoach overbid for the contracts and defaulted on its contractual obligations. The latest contract failure is the third time in 10 years that a private train operator has failed to see out its contract on the east coast main line. To break the cycle, we must overhaul a deregulated system that enables companies to make reckless bids, safe in the knowledge that the taxpayer will bail them out.

The most pressing concern for people and businesses in Lincoln is that further uncertainty casts doubt on Virgin’s promise of increased direct trains between Lincoln and London from May 2019. Additional services would provide a huge boost to the local economy. Tourism is a big deal in Lincoln. There would be benefits to residents, businesses and Lincoln’s industry in general. For months, I have been fighting to ensure that Lincoln gets the extra services that have long been promised. My constituents should not have to suffer because of the Government’s mismanagement of the rail travel system. Neither should businesses.

I have sought assurances from Network Rail, local stakeholders and Ministers. On 24 May in the Chamber, I asked the Secretary of State for Transport to make a “firm commitment” that the pledged extra services would be delivered. He responded by giving “all Members who are waiting for these new services an assurance that I will make sure that they are delivered.”—[Official Report, 24 May 2018; Vol. 641, c. 978.] Contrary to those assurances, I now understand that the extended services will not be going ahead as planned. There has been no formal announcement; I have that second hand from other stakeholders. Perhaps the Minister will clarify the point. Will he also reassure people and businesses in my constituency by giving a clear, unequivocal commitment that at some point Lincoln will indeed get the increase in the provision of direct trains that we have for so long been promised? If he can give me that assurance, when will we get them?

3.23 pm

Alan Brown (Kilmarnock and Loudoun) (SNP): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Mr Owen. As other hon. Members have done, I congratulate the hon. Member for Newcastle upon Tyne North (Catherine McKinnell) on securing the debate, and I commend her for the work that she does as chair of the all-party parliamentary group on the east coast main line.

The hon. Lady’s speech covered history and looked forward. As to the history, we heard about Stephenson and the Rocket, and the development of the original engines in Newcastle. That was interesting to me, and it made me feel I should mention some of my constituency’s rail history. The oldest remaining railway viaduct in the world, the Laigh Milton viaduct, is in my constituency. The town of Kilmarnock has a proud heritage of building railway locomotives. There are still two companies active in Kilmarnock involved in the manufacture and refurbishment of rail rolling stock: Wabtec and Brodie Engineering. QTS, which is located just outside my constituency, employs many of my constituents and is involved in the ongoing maintenance of rail infrastructure up and down the UK. It is a company that helps to keep trains running.

The hon. Member for Newcastle upon Tyne North clearly highlighted some of the issues affecting the east coast main line. As to punctuality, I noted the figure of 80%, against an 86% average in England and Wales. It is worth mentioning that the ScotRail franchise in Scotland operates at nearly 90% punctuality, and even that gets quite a bit of criticism, which shows what the level of performance on the east coast main line really is. However, it is not just a matter of statistics: the statistics mirror passenger experience, and it is important to point that out. If there is an intention to increase passenger or visitor numbers, and to get people to return to the railways, clearly there is a need for an enjoyable rail experience. That is tied in with punctuality and reliability.
[Alan Brown]

The issue underpins the whole argument about investment on the east coast main line. I support those calls, because the route is a cross-border one.

The £780 million package that magically appeared at the time of the Cabinet visit to the north in July was interesting. Obviously, it was welcome, but it made me think. I hope the Minister can explain. A surprise announcement kind of makes a mockery of the whole asset management system—the approach to managing infrastructure and going about long-term planning and investment—because suddenly, from nowhere, there is an announcement of a £780 million investment. It would be good if the Minister could explain the rationale for that and how it was prioritised in relation to other things that are still needed—either investment for the east coast main line, or other rail investment called for by Members in the surrounding area.

I have my own experience and memories of travelling on the east coast main line, which was the service of choice when going from the west coast of Scotland to London. At one time, the east coast main line had a much better service than the west coast main line, even though the journey was longer. It is clear that upgrades to the west coast main line have changed that dynamic and resulted in a shifting of the passenger balance, with more now using the west coast main line. That underpins the need for upgrades to the east coast main line. However, there are some parallels looking forward; some upgrades will be made to the west coast main line to facilitate High Speed 2, but they will leave other areas of the rail network further behind. Some passengers will end up with an even poorer second-class system, while other areas of the network will get upgrades to facilitate High Speed 2.

The valid point has been made that the Treasury can spike projects or control the final release of money. We need to move away from that. Surely the Department for Transport should make the final decisions on investment.

The hon. Member for Cleethorpes (Martin Vickers) made another of his repeated requests for upgrades in the Cleethorpes and Grimsby area. I have heard those requests many times, in the main Chamber and here, so it might be thought that at some point Ministers would hear his requests and act on them. It would be good to hear the Minister’s response. An ongoing issue that the hon. Gentleman touched on was the theory that privatisation is a joke. I think that the hon. Gentleman’s point about the mess that was inherited, but I still think something could have been done about the east coast main line. When the west coast main line was being done, it would have made sense to have a long-term plan for upgrading the spines along the west and east coasts, to see how that could generate growth and connectivity with cities and regions across the UK.

I can exclusively reveal that any speech in Westminster Hall by the hon. Member for Keighley (John Grogan) starts with, “I wasn’t going to speak, but I was inspired and now feel obliged to do so.” I agree completely with his comments about franchises and the fact that lawyers suck a lot of money out of the system. Cost consultants also suck a lot of money out of the system, and the money that we are paying for lawyers, cost consultants and management is money that could be used for investment and to drive growth in the railways.

Relevant points were raised about the Hatfield disaster, and about how ideology led to the privatisation of the rail infrastructure. That reminded me of a recent statement on the railways by the Transport Secretary, in which he spoke about the forthcoming rail review and kept referring to the fact that some failures of the existing system were due to what he called the “nationalised” part of the railway system. For me, that had bad undertones of future privatisation, which is why I challenged him on that point. Thankfully, he said on the record that there are no plans to privatise Network Rail, and we must certainly never go back to the disaster of the Railtrack venture.

The hon. Member for Lincoln (Karen Lee) made a plea for the improved services that have apparently been promised for Lincoln, and it would be good to hear the Minister’s response to that. She correctly pointed out problems with the existing franchise system, and the fact that tenderers are allowed to over-promise, under-deliver and walk away. There is something fundamentally and morally wrong with the fact that Virgin Trains East Coast was able to walk away owing the taxpayer £2 billion. The Secretary of State always says—the Minister probably does as well—that the £2 billion was not a bail-out, but if I let somebody who owed me £2 billion walk away from me, that would effectively be a £2 billion bail-out. Vtec had an IOU for £2 billion, and it was able to wrap it up and walk away. That is a bail-out, in layman’s language, and that money could have been invested in the railway. We have an investment of £780 million, but not go to shareholders but was invested straight back into the railway, again showing the merits of public sector involvement in the operation of the railways.

The hon. Gentleman highlighted the fact that the UK runs an unbalanced economy with a focus on London and the south-east, which he said was to the detriment of north-east England. I observe, however, that a Labour Government were in power from 1997 to 2010, and surely they should have done something about that imbalance and invested in the east coast main line up to the north-east.

Mr Hepburn: Do not forget the neglect that we in that Labour Government inherited. We turned around the imbalance in hospitals and schools, and we spent a fortune on raising standards to give working-class people a better chance in life.

Alan Brown: I take the hon. Gentleman’s point about the mess that was inherited, but I still think something could have been done about the east coast main line. I can exclusively reveal that any speech in Westminster Hall by the hon. Member for Cleethorpes (Martin Vickers) starts with, “I wasn’t going to speak, but I was inspired and now feel obliged to do so.” I agree completely with his comments about franchises and the fact that lawyers suck a lot of money out of the system. Cost consultants also suck a lot of money out of the system, and the money that we are paying for lawyers, cost consultants and management is money that could be used for investment and to drive growth in the railways.

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with £2 billion coming from track fees, that is old money being invested in rolling stock. I understand that the new operation will still generate track fees, but no private company should be able to walk away and still be involved in other franchise bids. It makes no sense.

I agree with the comments made about the franchise system, and I welcome the review into that. We must, however, move away from short-termism and towards longer-term plans for investment in the east coast main line. I agree with the hon. Member for Newcastle upon Tyne North about the need for the UK Government to work with the Scottish Government on cross-border planning and investment. The Scottish Government funded the reopening of the Waverley line down to the borders, which was the biggest new rail project in the UK for something like 100 years. We want that to extend further and become a proper cross-border connection again, and I ask the UK Government to work with the Scottish Government on that in the long term.

I cannot finish a speech on the railways without saying that the SNP wants Network Rail to be devolved to Scotland. The Transport Secretary keeps saying that Network Rail is such a problem, so why do the Tory Government not allow that part of Network Rail in Scotland to be devolved and become the responsibility of the Scottish Government, along with other operations in Scotland? That would perhaps help the efficiency of the east coast main line. It would save money spent on Network Rail, and any money saved could be reinvested. I will now conclude my remarks, and I look forward to hearing the Minister’s response.

3.35 pm

Rachael Maskell (York Central) (Lab/Co-op): It is good to see you in the Chair, Mr Owen, and I thank my hon. Friend the Member for Newcastle upon Tyne North (Catherine McKinnell) for opening the debate. I have raised many pertinent points, as well as going over the heritage of our railways and the National Railway Museum in York where it will have a good home. Our Rocket will end up residing at the National Railway Museum in York where it will have a good home. Our city can certainly boast its share of rail heritage.

I represent York, which is the mid-point on the east coast main line and a significant railway hub that brings many networks together. I therefore have a constituency interest to ensure that we get the right upgrade—as we have heard, it is well overdue. We heard from my hon. Friend the Member for Lincoln (Karen Lee) and from the hon. Member for Cleethorpes (Martin Vickers) about the significance of good connectivity through to London—my hon. Friend the Member for Stockton North (Alex Cunningham) and other hon. Members also mentioned connectivity. We must ensure that we get right that connectivity to the main line, and keep those flows moving through. Although we are talking about the east coast main line, this debate is also about routes that feed into that line and are being brought into the modern age, so that they are not, as my hon. Friend the Member for Newcastle upon Tyne North described, a kind of heritage rail service. We must ensure that control period 6 considers the continuum of a journey as opposed to the segregation of different routes.

Too often with transportation not only are road, rail and other forms of transport segregated, but separate segments of our fragmented rail system go to different places. Instead, we need to understand the power of connectivity and bring that forward. One of our biggest frustrations in the north is the fact that the Government have downgraded the trans-Pennine opportunity—Crossrail for the north—which would create connectivity between Liverpool, Manchester, through to Leeds, York and Hull, stretching north and south and, importantly, feeding into Sheffield and getting that connectivity right. We must connect up the powerhouse of the northern cities and drive the economy forward. Without that we have linear routes as opposed to the rail consolidation we need—that point was made powerfully by my hon. Friend the Member for Newcastle upon Tyne North.

This is not just about rail; it is about economic growth. The tremendous site of York Central sits adjacent to the main line. We want investment, and upgrading the east coast main line is one opportunity to drive that forward. Connectivity to the ports and across the trans-Pennine route will enhance that, as will heading north to Newcastle and Scotland.

We unquestionably need more capacity and speed, and we certainly need fewer delays—that is the real frustration faced by many passengers. It was shocking to learn this week that stations in York had the second highest number of delays in the country. The measure was just one minute, but that still leads to the stark realisation that we need great improvement across our rail networks.

The lack of investment in control period 5 has brought that into sharp focus. There are bottlenecks. There are overhead power line failures around, I think, the Retford area, which cause constant delays there. There are problems with old-fashioned fencing, through which animals come on to the tracks with great frequency. If animals can get on to the tracks, so can people, which creates a safety risk. The numerous level crossings along that route snarl up different conurbations. We need to ensure that the power needed to drive our railway into the future is available.

We also all know about the issues with our old infrastructure and rolling stock. That brings me on to the new Azuma trains, which have been put on pause by the Office of Rail and Road. Will the Minister tell us more about that? We understand that ORR has put the pause on because it requires Hitachi to resolve some safety issues, yet it has not withdrawn trains elsewhere on the network that have the same problems, including the Pendolino trains. There seems to be inconsistency in the safety features of those new trains and we need to understand why. I sat down with representatives from LNER last week who were also scratching their heads about that inconsistency, as were those from Network Rail. We therefore look to control period 6 to deliver a railway for the future.

Engineers say that one of their biggest frustrations is that they are brought in to find the best way to generate the most efficient and cost-effective rail enhancements at the wrong stage of the process. We need to ensure that, when engineering takes place, it is of the highest spec possible, because this is a once-in-a-generation opportunity for the east coast main line. We do not want to have to keep going back and tinkering with the spec. We want that investment at the forefront. Why have we seen a downgrade in the money? LNER and Network Rail told me that more resource is
needed to bring the enhancement and opportunity to the east coast main line that we need, so I want to know why that spec has been reduced.

Tracks are being upgraded, which we recognise the need for, as is the overhead line equipment between Peterborough and Doncaster—I mentioned Retford—and the power supply for digital signalling. Anyone who has the opportunity to visit the Rail Operating Centre in York will see the absolutely mind-blowing things that digital signalling can achieve. We will also have welcome upgrades of fencing and bridge-strike prevention planning. I talked to engineers in my constituency from Low & Bonar about their using laser technology to look at the strength of bridges and the opportunity that that provides. They can use digitalisation to engineer infrastructure, and to work with train designers as they do so. Level crossing closures are also needed. However, the opening up of Kings Cross will also be a real enhancement to the line.

We need to make sure that we have the full benefit of digital rail on the east coast main line, because that is where the future of our rail network sits. That upgrade is therefore important—it is a passion of the route operator of the east coast main line. It is certainly also one of mine and will be one of any future Labour Government. We will take those strides into the future, not into the past.

We know what needs to be done on the railways and do not need another year-long review. The power of bringing operations back under public control has been shown, with an increase in LNER patronage since it took over the east coast main line franchise. There is no appetite for a fourth franchising process. However, we need to bring track and train together in the public sector to bring the connectivity together. I say to my hon. Friend the Member for Keighley (John Grogan) that we absolutely believe that we should invest in new routes and new opportunities, and that we can do that under a national rail service. That is certainly what we want to do. It will not be a big, centralised body, as in the British Rail days. We are looking for a new model of public ownership that very much listens to the voice of the passenger at the local level when devising what to do. He will have to hold his breath before seeing the details. We have been working with the industry, and it is very excited about the model we are putting forward.

We also need to ensure that we see a return for the passenger as well as the state, and we believe that our model will deliver that. We have rightly heard of VTEC’s £2 billion scandal. It robbed that money from passengers and got away with it, and passengers are now paying more and more for tickets.

There is without doubt great opportunity for the future of the network. Journey times will be down. We also have to think of the opportunity for growth. Some 80 million passengers travel on that route each year. We want a modal shift, with people having confidence in the reliability of rail and moving out of their cars. Since 22 May, people up and down the country have lost confidence in rail because of the timetabling chaos. Our model will make sure that that can never be repeated, putting responsibility for operations and infrastructure in one place will mitigate against such disasters as those we have seen on the Government’s watch.

We want to make sure that rail is focused on the passenger, with good environments for passengers from stations through to trains, making sure that it is a public service in which people can once again have confidence. That requires good investment, which is what we want from the Government.

3.46 pm

The Minister of State, Department for Transport (Joseph Johnson): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Mr Owen. I congratulate the hon. Member for Newcastle upon Tyne North (Catherine McKinnell) on securing the debate and on giving us the opportunity to discuss investment on the east coast main line. She is the chair of the APPG which, as she mentioned, I was pleased to attend a meeting of earlier in the year. She takes great pride in the railway and its contribution to her region of the north-east. The Government very much want to build on that heritage and ensure that we leave a railway that is stronger for future generations.

As the hon. Lady says, the east coast main line is a great national asset. Its sheer scope makes its huge importance to the national economy absolutely inevitable. It runs from London, through the east Midlands, Yorkshire and Humber, north-east England and reaches Scotland. The scope of the line speaks for itself. The extent of that scope creates wonderful opportunities for communities that depend on the line to access many other parts of the country, such as the region so well represented by my hon. Friend the Member for Cleethorpes (Martin Vickers).

That said, the route is not without areas that need investment. The Government are committed to ensuring that we provide the money, time and resources that those areas require. I will take a few moments to describe to right hon. and hon. Members some of the investments that we are making in the east coast main line. However, before doing that, I will quickly respond to some of the more general points made about the distribution of transport infrastructure spending across the country, which is obviously a subject of great importance to Members for understandable reasons.

The chair of the Transport Committee, the hon. Member for Nottingham South (Lilian Greenwood), criticised the Government’s appraisal methods when deciding where to spend transport infrastructure funds. We do not accept that our methods do not provide regions with a fair share. As her Committee acknowledged, it is difficult to assign benefits specifically to one region from spending in that region when we have a national system such as the rail system. Benefits often spread beyond the area in which a specific investment is geographically located.

However, the Government have long acknowledged that the economy is imbalanced and needs rebalancing, and that changing the distribution of transport infrastructure spending to redress past patterns of underinvestment is an important part of what we need to do as an economy. We will therefore invest significantly in the north of England over the next few years. For example, between now and 2021, we will invest £13 billion in transport infrastructure in the north of England. Some of our biggest transport infrastructure projects will be in the north of England, such as the trans-Pennine upgrade, which has been allocated £2.9 billion for the next five-year spending period from 2019 to 2024.
It is often asserted, seemingly without challenge, that the south gets more planned transport infrastructure spending from central Government than the north, but analysis by the Infrastructure and Projects Authority suggests otherwise: for the next four years, it reckons otherwise; for the next four years, it reckons otherwise; for the next four years, it reckons otherwise; for the next four years, it reckons otherwise; for the next four years, it reckons otherwise; for the next four years, it reckons otherwise; for the next four years, it reckons otherwise; for the next four years, it reckons otherwise; for the next four years, it reckons otherwise; for the next four years, it reckons otherwise; for the next four years, it reckons otherwise; for the next four years, it reckons otherwise; for the next four years, it reckons otherwise; for the next four years, it reckons otherwise; for the next four years, it reckons otherwise; for the next four years, it reckons otherwise; for the next four years, it reckons otherwise; 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We have accepted the industry’s recommendation to significantly reduce the extent of the timetable change planned for this coming December. The industry is also reviewing proposed changes to the May 2019 timetable as part of a new and strengthened process to ensure that everything is ready before improvements are introduced and avoid the unacceptable disruption that passengers experienced in parts of the country this summer. That process is ongoing for the whole industry, but at this stage LNER has taken the decision to introduce improvements more gradually than was previously planned. The hon. Lady will get her services at Lincoln, and the rail industry intends to provide an update on plans for the May 2019 timetable across the country in the coming months.

I will end my remarks there to give time for the hon. Member for Newcastle upon Tyne North to wind up the debate.

Albert Owen (in the Chair): I call Catherine McKinnell, for the few seconds remaining.

3.59 pm

Catherine McKinnell: I thank the Minister for his response. He has been very good at engaging with the all-party group—let him be in no doubt that we will continue to engage. As much as he tried to present a rosy picture of Government investment in the east coast main line, we all know that it has serious challenges. It needs investment. We need to work together to ensure that we get that investment up and down the line where it is most required, and that the Government get this right. Railway investment is not an end in itself. It is most required, and that the Government get this investment up and down the line where it is most required.

Motion lapsed (Standing Order No. 10(6)).
planning to run the marathon together, which may be foolish, but we want to use that opportunity to highlight the importance of sport in prisons and in wider society.

Eddie Hughes (Walsall North) (Con): Although only 1% of the population of young people has been in care, 25% of the prison population has. They have particular challenges with regard to their education, given the chaotic lifestyle of their youth. Does my hon. Friend think that that is a particular issue?

Rachel Maclean: My hon. Friend highlights an important point. No doubt he is drawing on his vast experience of housing and local government. I thank him for raising that point; he is absolutely right.

I come on to other factors that lead to prisoners coming into the system. Many prisoners are without basic qualifications—many do not have English and maths skills beyond those of an 11-year-old. That is quite a shocking statistic and highlights the need for change, which is why it is at the centre of the strategy. I am pleased that the Government are taking steps to address the problem.

We want individuals to be given the skills they need to unlock their potential, based on their strengths. That is a profoundly Conservative value. We want to help individuals get a job as soon as they can after release because that is the chance they have to rebuild their lives. I know the Minister believes that as well. The strategy echoes that vision by setting out several steps to improve the provision of education in prisons. I want to focus on one or two of those steps—the empowerment of prison governors and the establishment of a prisoner apprenticeship pathway. Those two steps in particular will help address the future challenges we face. They will not only help address reoffending, but help to do that in the context of a changing prison population.

Many prisoners have low literacy rates, but there is also an increasing number of higher-educated prisoners, as a result of the increased prosecution of fraud, IT and sexual offences, which are often committed by a slightly different demographic. Although it might benefit one prison to be offered basic education services or more practical education courses, it might benefit another to have a greater choice of education options—including, potentially, higher education. By empowering prison governors and giving them the authority to set strategy, they can do what is right for their prison. I understand that the strategy is already in action. I look forward to hearing from the Minister how it is going and where he sees it going in the future.

No doubt many prisons would choose the Open University as a provider of higher education. I put on the record my respect for the OU, which has long been trying to reduce the burden of reoffending; it has provided higher education to prisoners since 1972. More than 1,000 prisoners have studied with the OU in the past year. There is clearly an appetite for self-improvement in prisons. Let us make the most of it.

Unfortunately, too many prisoners still do not engage with any education service while they are in prison. Education is a key opportunity for rehabilitation of what is quite literally a captive audience; this is an opportunity that the Government cannot and should not miss.

The prisoner apprenticeship pathway is an excellent example of how the strategy will help to increase the uptake of education and training programmes in prisons. It is a superb tool that makes good use of the time people spend in prison. Offenders will train in prison and then put that knowledge to good use in a guaranteed job on release. The scheme guarantees a prisoner a fresh start after release. Surely that is what we all want in our society—people to be given a fresh start to rebuild their lives, which is exceptionally important when it comes to reoffending. Education leads to jobs, which lead to an income, which leads to responsibilities and a lower likelihood of reoffending in future. A job can help someone who has lost their way to successfully transition back into society and normality. In the Conservative Government, we certainly all believe—as I believe others do across the House—that work is the primary way of rebuilding dignity and releasing human potential.

With that in mind, there is no reason why a prisoner should not have a job while they are in prison. I am so pleased that work in prisons is being encouraged by this Government. I note that more than 11,000 prisoners were working in prisons in the year 2016-17. That is giving purposeful activity, structure and meaning to a prisoner’s day, which contributes to a more stable prison environment and reduces costs on taxpayers, because prisoners undertake essential services themselves. More importantly, work in prison helps offenders develop many of the skills and attributes needed on release. About two thirds of prisoners are unemployed before entering custody and so may not have good employment records to recommend them to employers on release. Prison has a vital role to play in developing the skills and work ethic that employers are looking for.

Offenders who found employment in the 12 months after release from prison had one-year reoffending rates nearly 10 percentage points lower than similar offenders who did not find employment. That is a truly wonderful and life-enhancing statistic, where the value of work in prisons is clear. Employment really does help with a successful transition into society. Of course, that statistic highlights that more can be done, too.

There is benefit in exploring what more can be done to better use temporary release to facilitate smoother transitions into the workplace. For whatever reason, the use of temporary release has fallen, but work placements with employers outside prison walls would give prisoners the chance to apply their skills and to prove that they are hard-working and trustworthy, just as we all hope our young people will have a chance to do work experience while they are at school. Such placements would give prisoners a taste of work and a chance to readjust to life outside prison. I will be keen to hear what the Minister thinks about releasing more prisoners on temporary licence.

I note that the education and employment strategy recognises the importance of prisoners proving themselves to an employer. Although better education can help ex-offenders overcome some of the barriers to gaining employment on release, it cannot help overcome others; I am thinking particularly of the issue of prejudice. I welcome the strategy’s focus on supporting the offender after release by engaging with employers on issues such as prejudice. Understandably, many employers are reluctant to hire an ex-offender, and prisoners face stigma. I have come across this in my life experience—I was an employer
before I came into Parliament. There is a notable lack of understanding about what prisoners can contribute to a workplace, and there are natural concerns for the other people who work there. I am glad that there will be some practical suggestions in the strategy to help overcome some of those barriers.

Employers sometimes express concerns that they might find ex-offenders difficult to trust, or they expect them to be unreliable. However, people who have employed ex-offenders have told me that, with effective rehabilitation, some ex-offenders demonstrate that potential employers’ prejudices are unfounded. Once someone has had a chance to show what they can do and to prove themselves, they can sometimes become the most trustworthy member of a team or organisation. That is to be warmly welcomed.

The education and employment strategy sets out a number of steps for improving the employment prospects of ex-offenders, and that is really encouraging. I note that one aspect of the strategy is the introduction of the New Futures Network, which will engage with employers by educating them about the changes that the strategy will bring to prison education and training and by persuading them to take on ex-offenders. I am pleased to see the civil service leading by example by employing ex-offenders—it is obviously in a position to lead and to shine a light on other employers.

Challenges remain, of course. Many employers are still at best sceptical about recruiting ex-prisoners at the end of their sentences. A YouGov study recently revealed that 50% of employers would not even consider employing an ex-offender—that is a great shame, because at the moment there are many vacancies that companies are unable to fill. Ex-offenders are a valuable pool of resource, and we ought to be able to give people an opportunity to rebuild their lives. I hope to hear from the Minister about what more can be done.

I am pleased that I have been able to raise this important issue in the debate. Of course, we need as a society to see prisons fulfilling their role: to punish offenders. That is absolutely right, that is what the taxpayer demands, and that is justice—its primary purpose. They should also be places of discipline, hard work and self-improvement. It is right that prisoners get the help they need to turn their lives around.

Prisons can do more, and I am pleased that the Government have introduced a very positive and constructive strategy that seeks to address that issue. In recent months, we have seen the Minister on our television screens, making many comments about the strategy—that is to be applauded, because we have to put it at the front and centre of our policies as a progressive and compassionate Conservative Government.

If we get this right, that will be wholly positive. Prison is an opportunity for rehabilitation, which has clear benefits for society; it leads to less reoffending and a lighter burden on the taxpayer and on society. I warmly welcome the education and employment strategy. I look forward to hearing the Minister’s remarks, and I thank him for coming to the debate.

4.14 pm

The Minister of State, Ministry of Justice (Rory Stewart): It is a great pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Mr Betts. I pay tribute to my hon. Friend the Member for Redditch (Rachel Maclean) for making a powerful speech and for securing a debate on such an important subject. I also pay tribute to my hon. Friend the Member for Walsall North (Eddie Hughes) and the hon. Member for Strangford (Jim Shannon), both of whom have been strong supporters of the entire project of engaging with prisoners and offender reform in many debates in Westminster Hall and in the Chamber.

In essence, we are dealing with a classic issue of public policy—something where the objective or target really is a big prize. If we can get prisoners into education, and through education into employment, they are less likely to offend and there will be fewer victims. The public will be safer, and the prisoners’ lives will be turned around. The problem is that it is also a classic issue of public policy because it is easy to talk about but difficult to do much about.

The problem with this debate is that at almost any time in the past 175 years, Ministers would have stood up and talked about prison reform. Despite 175 years of Ministers talking about prison reform and about investing in education in prisons, we are still in a situation where only 20% of prisoners get a job on release—that has been pretty static for decades. About one fifth of the people coming into prison have a job and about one fifth of the people leaving prison have a job.

What is the answer to this problem? Clearly, it is not a question of silver bullets. In 1898, Herbert Gladstone stood up and gave a great speech in the House. In language that I cannot hope to emulate, he said that prison “discipline and treatment should be more effectually designed to maintain, stimulate, or awaken the higher susceptibilities of prisoners, to develop their moral instincts, to train them in orderly and industrial habits, and, whenever possible, to turn them out of prison better men and women, both physically and morally, than when they came in.”—[Official Report, 24 March 1898; Vol. 55, c. 858.]

That is over 120 years ago—it is very difficult to disagree with the basic expression of what we have been trying to do in this country for a very long time.

What are the problems? The first problem was touched on by my hon. Friend the Member for Walsall North: many prisoners come from very difficult backgrounds. As we have heard, perhaps a quarter of them come out of care. Nearly a third of prisoners have serious alcohol addiction issues, and another third have serious drug addiction issues. Perhaps half of prisoners have a reading age of under 11 and a significant number have a reading age of under 6. Nearly 40% of our prisoners have been excluded from school at one time or another.

To fast-forward from the rhetoric around education to the reality, one needs to imagine oneself in Pentonville—I was there today. Imagine a small classroom in midsummer. It is very hot and five men are sitting there with a single teacher. These are people who have never found it easy to go to school. They have never found it easy to listen to a teacher. Those five men will be at very different educational levels. One will be unable to read and write, and another one will be bored because he is in prison for theft but he can already read and write and does not understand why he is in the class. There will be a general sense that everyone is rotating through—on an average day at Pentonville, 45 to 50 new prisoners turn up and a similar number are released. It is very difficult to deal with that.
Solving the problem is not a question of making grand statements about the human soul—Mr Gladstone made much better statements about that in 1898 than I am able to make today. It is about understanding exactly what is going wrong in that prisoner’s journey, step by step. The first thing is to recognise the type of prison that that prisoner is in. Is it a reception prison that they are coming into for a short period, straight out of the courts from remand? If it is a prison where they are likely to spend six months, 12 months or two years of their life, a very different kind of education provision can be delivered.

Secondly, are the kind of qualifications offered in prison A the same as the qualifications offered in prisons B, C and D? A prisoner could move to four prisons in the course of their career. Too often, as a prisoner follows that course, they pursue a City & Guilds qualification in prison A, but it is not available in prison B. Even more fundamentally, the core common curriculum might not be available, so they might not be able to study English, maths and information and communications technology. In addition, governors frequently do not feel genuinely empowered to control the prisoner’s life. They do not feel that they have the leverage or flexibility to say to the education provider, “What really matters in this area is bricklaying,” or, “We have a real shortage of people in scaffolding. I want you to provide scaffolding training.” They do not feel they would get rewarded or promoted for that.

We are trying to deal with those kinds of practical issues in the education and employment strategy. The first thing we did was introduce a common core curriculum, which will ensure that, right the way through the prison service, every single prison, regardless of where it is, which part of the country it is in and how long the prisoner is there, will deliver the core curriculum of English, maths, ICT and English as a foreign language for people who do not speak English.

Secondly, we are ensuring that the qualifications in prisons are the same. A lot of this sounds pretty simple, but the complex and strange world of Government procurement means that we have ended up having a series of conversations about dynamic purchasing systems. We have ended up with 12 preferred suppliers for the core common curriculum and 300 suppliers for the additional work. We have 17 core groups bidding in, with a selected shortlist of five for each area.

What does that mean? Imagine that you are the prisons group director for Yorkshire, Mr Betts. You get your six prisons together and you have five people on a shortlist—it could include Milton Keynes college or Novus. Eighty per cent. of the score is based on your judgment, with your prison governors, of which will provide the best quality of education, and the other 20% is based on the cost of the provision.

Rachel Maclean: I welcome what the Minister is saying. It is heartening to hear how much progress has been made. Will he enlighten us about the role of volunteers who go into prisons and offer their time freely because they believe in the cause of helping prisoners to rebuild their lives? For example, my son is an English literature student and he went to a nearby prison and taught prisoners Shakespeare. He said it was the most profound experience he had ever had. The feedback was that the prisoners got something out of it too. Clearly, there is a vast spectrum of that sort of activity. I very much hope that what he did does not crowd out the kind of activity that the Minister is describing. Will he enlighten us about that?

Rory Stewart: Absolutely. To put this in context, if you were the Yorkshire prison group director, Mr Betts, you would get your governors together to look at your list of five. You would choose the supplier that you think will provide the best quality for your core common curriculum, and then you would adjust for your area. How do you do that? Humber, which is a training prison, is currently offering coding, upholstery and design services to other prisons. Lindholme—in Yorkshire—will be focusing on construction skills. Then, as my hon. Friend pointed out, you need to be open to bolting on to that the incredible education offerings of other types of volunteers. I taught Shakespeare in prisons when I was an undergraduate, so I can relate to what my hon. Friend’s son has been doing. The governor needs to provide space for those voluntary organisations to come into the prison, and they need to get the regime right for the core common prison day so they can get the prisoners into the classroom.

Jim Shannon: In the Minister’s response to the intervention of the hon. Member for Redditch (Rachel Maclean), he referred to the educational quality of the providers he is looking at. Everything he said is right, but some prisoners need daily living skills, budgeting skills and how-to-live skills. How do we incorporate those sorts of skills into the very basics of their lives?

Rory Stewart: The core of the answer is that we must give governors the freedom to adjust to the prisoners. They must take responsibility for that. One of the big changes in this framework is that we have taken power out of the centre and given it to governors so they can do exactly that. How are governors doing that? Increasingly, numeracy, literacy and budgeting skills are taught through the upholstery, carpentry and construction courses. The best way to get people to learn those things is often to focus on the practical vocational skills, and attach life skills to them.

In Yorkshire—I want to pursue this example a bit further—the New Futures Network gets people with the prisons group director to connect directly to employers. It reaches out to employers’ boards and ensures that employers understand what is on offer in the prison. I pay tribute not just to Paul Fowether, the prisons group director in Yorkshire, but to organisations such as Tempus Novo. My hon. Friend the Member for Redditch asked about voluntary organisations. Tempus Novo is a charity run by two terrific ex-prison officers who have spent 25 years working on the landings. They left as band 4 officers—not governing-grade officers—and set up that organisation. They walk with employers into the prison, introduce them to the prisoners, reassure them about what is involved in employing offenders, and go into the workplace with the offender for the first interview. If any problems emerge in the workplace, Tempus Novo follows them up.

In the end, education and employment for prisoners is not about big ideas or fancy strategies. It is about doing 50 or 60 things well and looking carefully at the quality of what we are delivering. It is about speaking
to prison governors and prisoners and saying, “What is going wrong with the curriculum? How many hours a day are you able to spend in the classroom? Is the fan working in the classroom? Are the teachers actually turning up? Is the qualification you got of any use in the outside world? Yes, you are beginning to go on an apprenticeship scheme, but are you able to connect it to the Government system? Yes, you are learning how to abseil, but are you getting the health and safety support to be able to turn that into being a window cleaner on a high-altitude building? What are we doing with release on temporary licence”—that is a question from my hon. Friend—“to make sure we give people the chance to spend time in an employer’s workplace before they leave prison formally?” Changing that is about changing a dozen small rules. We must ensure there is not a statutory lie-down period in each new prison, so that if a person is released on temporary licence in one prison and moves to another prison, they do not suddenly have to sit back in the prison and lose touch with their workplace.

If we get all those things right—it will be hard yards—we can make a difference. At the moment, only 20% of prisoners who leave prison get a job. If we can get it up to 25% or 30%, it would be fantastic and would change nearly 40 years of stagnation. Those do not sound like big numbers, but nearly 200,000 people circle through our criminal justice system every year. Every one of those people we get into a job is 7% less likely to reoffend. That translates not just into tens of thousands of families with an income and somebody at home with a job, but into thousands fewer crimes and thousands fewer victims of crime. It leads to a society that is healthier and safer.

At the core of this is our belief in the capacity for humans to change, and in our incredibly hard-working prison officers, governors and prisons group directors who are driving through this change. Employers such as Timpson take a huge risk, but they put a lot of energy into understanding prisoners, their needs and the skills they need to stand eight hours a day on the shop floor dealing with customers. If we get all those things right, we can be proud not just of our criminal justice system and our education strategy but of our society.

Question put and agreed to.

**Mental Health: Absence from Work**

4.30 pm

**Craig Tracey** (North Warwickshire) (Con): I beg to move.

That this House has considered the financial effect of absence from work due to mental health problems.

It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship. Mr Betts. World Mental Health Day took place a week ago, and I am pleased to have secured this debate on such an important issue so close to the marking of that day. It is hugely encouraging that in the last couple of years the world has woken up to the realities of mental illness. According to the mental health charity Mind, in the UK alone, one in six workers is affected.

The issues and challenges surrounding those suffering and recovering from mental ill health have become better understood and, as a result, its prominence as a public policy issue has grown considerably. NHS England’s five year forward view dashboard provides statistical evidence of the Government’s investment in mental health services, with a total planned spend of £11.9 billion in this financial year. Encouragingly, over the last two years, there has been a total real-terms increase of 3.7%. However, despite that investment, the Government’s landmark independent review of mental health and employers last year showed that 300,000 people in the UK lose their jobs every year as a result of long-term mental health issues, and that nearly 13% of all sickness absence days in the UK can be attributed to a mental health condition.

The workplace needs to be at the forefront of better policy to secure better outcomes for sufferers. Today, I intend to focus on the financial effect that absence from work because of mental health has on the individual, their employer and, in turn, the economy. Eighteen months ago, I led a debate in this very Chamber on the issues and challenges surrounding those suffering from mental ill health. It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship.

The workplace needs to be at the forefront of better policy to secure better outcomes for sufferers. Today, I intend to focus on the financial effect that absence from work because of mental health has on the individual, their employer and, in turn, the economy. Eighteen months ago, I led a debate in this very Chamber on the issues and challenges surrounding those suffering from mental ill health. It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship.

At the time I was encouraged to hear of the review carried out by Lord Dennis Stevenson and Paul Farmer, entitled “Thriving at Work: a review of mental health and employers”. On publication, the report set out a mental health vision for our country by 2027. The report proposed that all organisations

“whatever their size, will be equipped with the awareness and tools to not only address but prevent mental ill health caused or worsened by work”; that they would be

“equipped to support individuals with a mental health condition to thrive, from recruitment and throughout the organisation”;

and that they would also be

“aware of how to get access to timely help to reduce sickness absence caused by mental ill health.”
It is well documented that one in four people is affected by a mental health problem—the effects of which are wide-ranging—at some point in their life. Those problems can affect an individual’s physical health, their relationships, their financial resilience and their work life. Mental health problems are also linked to other illnesses and fluctuate significantly. Often, people suffering from mental ill health find themselves needing to take a period away from work to recover, which may lead to a significant reduction in income. That reduction often means that people fall behind on their bills, rely increasingly on credit or run down their savings, which can also have the effect of prolonging their illness further.

Not only is supporting those affected by mental health issues the right thing to do, but it makes total economic sense. A joint study soon to be published by Mind and the Chartered Insurance Institute puts the annual cost of mental ill health to employers in the UK at as much as £42 billion, with the total cost to the UK economy estimated to be £99 billion. Those costs come from presenteeism—when individuals are at work but significantly less productive because of their condition—as well as from sickness absence and staff turnover. With such a significant impact, it stands to reason that if we are to improve the mental health outcomes of our society, we need to focus on supporting the workplace to help drive that.

The Stevenson-Farmer review highlighted the fact that the average return on investment of workplace mental health interventions is £4.20 for every pound spent. Clearly, we need to look at ways in which companies can develop preventive strategies to secure the right work-life balance and develop a holistic understanding of wellness, while also encouraging staff to look after both their physical and mental wellbeing. It is reassuring to see therefore that a range of tools are already available to assist employers. Training managers and empowering HR professionals, who can then give line managers the support they need, should be a priority for employers large and small across the country. A critical point to return to is that if employees do not feel able to disclose a health problem, employers cannot hope to put in the right support for them. The earlier open and supportive conversations take place between an employer and an employee, the more effective the support will be.

As a former insurance professional and chairman of the all-party parliamentary group for insurance and financial services, I emphasise the role that health and protection insurance benefits can play to support employers in identifying the solutions that work best for their workforce. From my ongoing conversations with all parts of the insurance industry, it is clear to me that it is constantly working to improve understanding of medical conditions, as well as the availability of existing and new treatments, while helping customers manage the financial risks of their medical condition. The growth in resources offered by insurance companies to support firms and workers experiencing mental health difficulties is testament to how seriously those issues are taken by the industry. As an example, AXA PPP healthcare has teamed up with a health tech start-up, BioBeats, to help employees manage stress and fatigue through wearable technology.

We need to remember that for many of us, the workplace is where we spend most of our time. Employers of all sizes and from all sectors should be prepared to support their staff through periods of crisis when they are unable to work as a result of mental ill health, by providing preventive measures and access to early rehabilitation, and offering them a financial safety net if they need to be off for longer periods of time. Insurance products such as income protection can—and do—help with that, producing results that benefit employees as well as employers. However, there remains a need to raise awareness among employers and the workforce about the need for, and availability of, insurance solutions in the workplace. To aid that, there needs to be a conversation with Government about how we can incentivise employers to take up covers such as income protection for their workforce. The new Single Financial Guidance Body should be at the forefront of that as it has the potential to place a significant focus on improving greater financial resilience as well as improving awareness of protection.

Our mind is our most valuable asset, and like any asset, we need to make sure that it is properly taken care of. As the Government’s review demonstrated, the UK can ill afford the productivity cost of poor mental health. Moreover, the cost to individuals is difficult to calculate. While the insurance industry has made progress in helping to support its customers and employees through mental health struggles, that will work only if people feel supported enough to seek the help that they need while at work.

There is a huge incentive for employers, for the Government and for the industry to work together to better improve policy, minimise the financial impact of sickness absence because of mental health problems, promote sustainable recovery and, in turn, improve productivity. I look forward to hearing colleagues’ contributions and the Minister’s response.

4.39 pm

Jim Shannon (Strangford) (DUP): It is a pleasure to be called to speak, Mr Betts.

I congratulate the hon. Member for North Warwickshire (Craig Tracey) on securing the debate. His introduction was excellent. The subject is important and topical, and one that I am aware of primarily through my constituents, as will be the case for others who participate in the debate. I hope that the Minister will give us some answers.

Recently, I read an interesting article in the Safety and Health Practitioner about this very issue. The crux of the matter is clear: with great respect, we are doing a disservice to those suffering from mental health issues if we make no changes. That is why this debate in Westminster Hall is important, even though many other things are happening in the House at the same time.

We are all aware of the massive impact that mental health issues have on our physical wellbeing, our mental acumen and our ability to cope with work relationships, home life and, simply, life in general. As an elected representative, I am into my 34th year, whether as a councillor, an Assembly Member or, now, an MP. Over all those years I have been very aware of those with mental health issues such as depression and anxiety, and the impact that all that has on their life, work, income and whole lifestyle. The issue is so important.
The article is worth reading—it would be time well spent—but I do not have the time to repeat it verbatim in full:

“In the workplace, mental health issues can have a serious impact on both the morale of employees, those suffering from mental health issues and their colleagues who then pick up the additional workload.”

If an individual is under pressure to work but is not able to cope and is doing less, who knows who else will have to do more? That is one of the reasons why I want to highlight the issue.

The article goes on:

“It can also impact an organisation’s productivity and profitability through overtime costs, recruitment of temporary or permanent cover—absence from work due to mental health issues is thought to cost the UK economy £26 billion per annum.”

That assesses the magnitude of the issue financially, but it only tells a small part of the story. Each one of us, as elected representatives, will have individual cases with which to illustrate matters. Furthermore:

“Mental health issues can appear as the result of experiences in both our personal and working lives.”

Sometimes people’s personal life spills over into their working life, and sometimes their working life spills over into their private life. The person who is always happy and jolly in the workplace might not be a happy or jolly person when he or she gets home.

The Health and Safety Executive’s draft health and work strategy for work-related stress identifies that 1.5% of the working population suffers from mental health issues, a figure that resulted in 11.7 million lost working days in 2015-16. That is another indication of how, if we improve the health ability of our workforce, we can save working days and thereby turn around the profitability of a company. Compare that figure with self-reported injuries: 4.9 million working days lost—the scale of workplace mental ill health is almost two and a half times the physical impact of unsafe workplaces and working practices. Clearly, something needs to be done. Perhaps the job of the Minister and his Department is to lead the way. Furthermore, it is suspected that at least a third of injuries go unreported, and the same is likely to be true for work-related stress.

The initiative “Mates in Mind” has identified that the suicide rate in the construction industry could be 10 times more than the rate for construction fatalities. If that estimation is true, we have a massive problem that needs to be addressed. I am pleased that the Government created a suicide prevention Minister—that is a direction we need to be moving in. That Minister is not present, but perhaps the Minister responding to this debate will also comment on that initiative.

In 2011, the then coalition Government developed “No Health Without Mental Health”, a cross-Government mental health outcomes strategy for people of all ages. It was a great idea, but it has not stopped the rise in the numbers of those with mental health issues. The document states how the Government want people to recognise mental health in the same way as they view physical and biological health.

The strategy also set out the aspiration of improved services for people with mental health issues. However, only an extra £15 million is expected to be pledged for creating places of safety and, with respect to the Minister, that amounts to only about £23,000 per parliamentary constituency. That is not a terrible lot per constituency—mine has a population of 79,000; I am not sure about the Minister’s constituency, but the average one has about 70,000, 75,000 or 80,000. If that is the case, that is about £3 per person, which does not really go anywhere towards addressing the issue.

According to the Centre for Mental Health, the financial cost to British business of mental ill health is an estimated £26 billion per annum, but positive steps to improve the management of mental health in the workplace can enable employers to save at least 30% of the cost of lost production and staff turnover. We are looking not only for the Government to do something but for companies to. It is important for companies to accept their responsibility—clearly, if they cut down on days lost to mental stress by making some changes, they thereby help themselves. If they can indeed save at least 30% of the cost of lost production and staff turnover, I say gently that it is an open-door policy and one that should be adopted right away.

One in four people will experience a mental health problem in any year. A common misconception is that mental health problems are only caused by issues at home—no, they are not—so some employers feel that it is not appropriate, or their responsibility, to intervene and provide support to employees. More commonly, the cause of an employee’s mental health problems is a combination of issues relating to both work and private lives.

To conclude, what I have sought today is not only to show in a small way support for the hon. Member for North Warwickshire but to seek Government intervention and help, and to raise company awareness. Companies have a clear role to play and one that they cannot ignore or not take responsibility for. I believe that the hon. Gentleman intended to demonstrate in his introduction to the debate that it is more cost-effective to take small steps to promote good mental health in the workplace, rather than having members of staff feeling like they cannot cope and going on the sick. We want to prevent that if possible.

I believe that enforced lunch breaks away from desks are an essential component, for example. It is all too easy for people to stay at their desks—my staff do it all the time. I was thinking about this before the debate: sometimes we ought to say to our staff, “Girls, go on down to the wee café there and take half an hour, 45 minutes or an hour, whatever it may be, away from the office”. If someone comes in, they speak to them. I am not saying that they should not do that, but I am saying that the two—work and breaks—need to be divorced from each other.

I do not have all the answers but I do believe that we must do more—not because that is good for business, but for the sake of our one in four who are struggling with their mental health and who simply need help.

Mr Clive Betts (in the Chair): We are going to have a Division imminently, so it is sensible to suspend the sitting now for 15 minutes. We can go to vote and then come back to resume the debate.

4.47 pm

Sitting suspended for a Division in the House.
5.3 pm

On resuming—

Marion Fellows (Motherwell and Wishaw) (SNP): It is a real pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Mr Betts. I congratulate the hon. Member for North Warwickshire (Craig Tracey) on securing this debate and on speaking so passionately and eloquently, and with such knowledge of this subject.

I have been in the position of being off work long term with stress, which is a mental health issue. I was in the fortunate position of being on full pay. A colleague of mine—a fellow college lecturer—was also off long term with stress but she did not want to admit to her employer the real reason why she was off sick long term. It still requires a great deal of courage for someone to admit that they have a mental health issue. As usual, the hon. Member for Strangford (Jim Shannon) gave us a very good picture of what is going on in Northern Ireland, and concentrated on the economic case for dealing well with this issue. Employers have a part to play.

Hon. Members would not expect me to do anything but talk about Scotland—that is my role here, because there is some good work going on in Scotland on this issue. I am sure the Minister knows of some of it, and I would like to draw it to his attention. In the workplace, mental health issues can have a serious impact on the morale of employees: those suffering from the mental health issues, and their colleagues who pick up the additional workload. They can have an impact on an organisation’s productivity and profitability, through overtime costs and recruitment of temporary or permanent cover. Absence from work due to mental health issues is thought to cost the UK economy £35 billion per annum. We can play with those numbers but it is still a huge amount of money. A total of 91 million days are lost each year due to mental health problems. The scale of workplace mental ill health is almost 2.5 times the physical impact of unsafe workplaces and working practices.

In January 2016, the Conservative Prime Minister pledged to “tackle the stigma around mental health problems.” I am sure she really meant it. She also pledged an extra £50 million, expected to be used to create places of safety, which, as was mentioned, is about £23,000 per parliamentary constituency—not nearly enough. The House of Commons Public Accounts Committee said in September that it was “sceptical” about the Government’s attempt to improve mental health services without a significant amount of extra cash.

Providing support for employees is very important for the individual concerned. There is a strong business case for getting it right on mental health at work. We must eliminate stigma and discrimination in work. That requires a joined-up approach and a genuine commitment to support staff and to make it okay to talk about mental health. The Scottish Government funds the “See Me in Work” programme, which aims to support organisations to improve the working lives of employees with mental health problems, to encourage an equal and clear recruiting process and to ensure that those returning to work following ill health are fully supported back into the workplace.

The Scottish Government are working with employers on how they can best act to protect and improve mental health, and to support employees experiencing poor mental health. That will help employers to identify and provide appropriate training opportunities. To support workplace mental health and wellbeing makes economic sense for businesses. The Scottish Government are exploring with others innovative ways of connecting mental health, disability and employment support in Scotland. That will allow individuals to more easily navigate the current fragmented and complex landscape of support, allowing them to find a way to support at an early enough stage to make a real difference to their ability to sustain or return quickly to paid work when they encounter problems.

When I had my experience, everyone around me knew that I had a problem; I was in the middle of it and did not know. We need to look after each other when we are in such a situation. People who develop poor mental health should receive support to stay in work, just as they would if they had physical health problems. The Scottish Government endorsed “Good Mental Health For All”, which was published by NHS Health Scotland in 2016.

Issues that can contribute to inequalities that can lead to poor mental health include low pay and working poverty. The Scottish Government believe in promoting fair work and the real living wage. The real living wage as defined by the Scottish Government is £8.75 an hour. The UK promotes a living wage, for over-25s only, of only £7.83. People who are in employment but who are not earning enough to sustain themselves and their families often find themselves with bad mental health, because of the sheer pressure on their daily lives due to low wage employment.

We need to look early at preventive mechanisms, so that subsequent generations will be able to enter and remain in work. As with most systemic problems, the earlier we can get to people to help them, the better for all concerned. Prevention and early intervention are key to minimising both the prevalence and incidence of poor mental health and the severity and lifetime impact of mental disorders and mental illnesses. Prevention and early intervention must be a focus of activity and funding. The Scottish Government are funding an improved provision of services to treat mental health problems among children and adolescents so that, when they grow older, they can cope better with their illnesses in the workplace. Teaching our children resilience from an early age will help with mental health issues over a whole lifetime.

In December 2017, the Scottish Government announced a £95,000 investment in a youth competition on mental health, which will be delivered in partnership with the Scottish Association for Mental Health and Young Scot. It launched formally in April. As reported by the mental welfare commission for Scotland in 2016, there has been an improvement—a lower incidence of young people being admitted to non-specialist wards—and we want to see that continue. Mental health really deserves parity of esteem with physical health.

Mental ill health accounts for the biggest cohort of people unable to work due to sickness, yet that cohort has the poorest outcomes from the Department for Work and Pensions-contracted Work programme. The Department’s own evaluation of the Work programme suggests that it is not leading to the provision of appropriate specialist support. Instead, people with more complex needs are often parked by providers. The activities that people are asked to do are often inappropriate, with their conditions not being taken into account. That leads to a higher turnover of staff and more days off.
Both employers and employees are incurring costs from the UK Government’s Work programme, which in many cases is shambolic.

The UK Government should scrap their work capability assessments so that people with mental health problems are better able to enter the workforce in jobs suitable for their needs. The current isolated nature of the WCA means that it functions as an eligibility test for employment and support allowance but not an assessment of what support is needed.

No Government can ignore the financial effect of absence from work due to mental ill health. I look forward to the Minister’s response to some of the issues raised today.

5.12 pm

Paula Sherriff (Dewsbury) (Lab): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Mr Betts. I thank the hon. Member for North Warwickshire (Craig Tracey) for securing such an important and timely debate. Further, I thank him for his thoughtful speech. My friend the hon. Member for Motherwell and Wishaw (Marion Fellows), who represents two places that she knows I am familiar with from my childhood, spoke incredibly bravely, which is no surprise, about her own battle with mental health in the workplace. Everyone in the Chamber will agree with her that prevention and early intervention must be the key when we are looking at all aspects of mental health.

As other cases that we have heard about have shown, for the one in four people who experience mental health issues there are serious consequences in all areas of their lives. Of course that includes work, which the hon. Member for Strangford (Jim Shannon) said is where we spend most of our time—I am sure hon. Members agree. Right now, it is estimated that up to 5 million workers are experiencing a mental health condition, although we all acknowledge that it is difficult to quantify such numbers when we are talking about millions of people. Many are frightened to come forward, for a variety of reasons.

The human cost of the mental health epidemic we face is incalculable, and every individual deserves the treatment they need. When it comes to mental health in the workplace, research from Mind and others has shown that we can put a number to the cost of failure to fund our mental health services adequately. Poor mental health at work is estimated to cost taxpayers between £24 billion and £27 billion a year in NHS costs, benefit costs and lost tax revenue.

The costs for British businesses are also significant. Research from the insurance sector shows that it costs small and medium-sized enterprises £30,000 to replace a staff member in recruitment costs, training time and a staff member in recruitment costs, training time and lost productivity. When 300,000 people with long-term mental health problems are losing their jobs each year, that is no small problem. The hon. Member for North Warwickshire also alluded to that figure. The total annual cost to the UK economy from our mental health crisis is an eye-watering £99 billion.

There is also a flip side. As the TUC points out, workers with mental health problems, despite often suffering illness, contributed £226 billion to UK GDP in 2016. Their work supports our economy and our society must support them. However, in so many cases of poor mental health at work there is a direct, negative link to Government policies. Many of the worst-affected professions are in our public services, which have suffered under austerity. For example, the Office for National Statistics has found that health and social care workers—including those who treat others for mental health conditions—are at an especially high risk of experiencing poor mental health. It also found that low-income workers who do not earn enough to make ends meet, sometimes receiving a top-up via universal credit, are more than twice as likely to experience poor mental health as other workers. Not being able to put food on the table and being forced to rely on the shambolic universal credit system is enough to affect anybody’s mental health.

What about people in precarious work? Under this Government we have seen an explosion in the number of insecure workers: staff on zero-hours, temporary or agency contracts and workers forced to be self-employed so that employers do not have to take responsibility for their rights. Research from the GMB union—I declare an interest as a proud member of it—showed that more than 60% of precarious workers had suffered stress or anxiety as a result of their work or had been to work while unwell for fear of losing their pay or their job. Over a third would also struggle to cope with an unexpected bill for £500, with all the anxieties and stresses that creates.

Those with barely any employment rights have three options when it comes to their mental health. They can take days off unpaid, lose their insecure work due to their condition or suffer in silence, continuing to work as things get worse and worse. Seventy-eight per cent of the workers the GMB spoke to had previously been in permanent employment. That is not flexible working; it is the new normal. The Prime Minister has declared that austerity is over and promised to tackle insecure work. The Budget will be the test of whether she means it.

Health Ministers have given us warm words but little action on mental health. The Farmer-Stevenson report made a number of recommendations on mental health and employers, which the Government claimed to support wholeheartedly. However, almost a year since its publication, how much action has there been? Several recommendations were addressed to the Government, including changes in the public sector and ensuring the NHS prioritises mental health. However, the NHS is crippled by cuts, and its own staff are suffering. For example, the GMB found that 39% of ambulance workers have suffered from post-traumatic stress disorder, and 12% took sick leave due to stress, anxiety, depression and related conditions in 2016-17, which totalled 80,000 sick days. Given that the chronic lack of funding for frontline mental health services has led to excessive waiting lists for even basic talking therapies, is it likely that those workers got timely and effective treatment as the Farmer-Stevenson report advocates?

The report also recommended an increased role for the Health and Safety Executive. However, instead of providing resources for its work, the Government have continued to cut its funding. In a particularly bitter irony, the HSE now has one of the highest levels of anxiety among its staff of any public service employer. Perhaps the Minister can tell us who will inspect the
inspectors. What resources will go to the HSE and what progress has been made in implementing that specific recommendation?

One of the report’s key findings was that the stigma around mental health is still a barrier for employees seeking support. Other Members have alluded to that. The Conservative manifesto committed to “extend Equalities Act protections against discrimination to mental health conditions that are episodic and fluctuating.” That would protect people who have long-term mental conditions from discrimination, and people who have short-term episodes of poor mental health, such as those caused by bipolar disorder.

People with such life-changing conditions might be deemed by an employer not to meet the current Equality Act 2010 definition. In one case, a worker with bipolar disorder was stable on medication, but asked to start work a little later because of the effect of the medication. Their boss refused. Mental health charity Rethink advised the worker that they could take legal action, but they felt that would just cause more stress. With the stigma around complex conditions such as bipolar disorder, when will the Equality Act 2010 be extended so that people get the support they so desperately need?

Similarly, employers sometimes see making reasonable adjustments as doing someone a favour rather than meeting their legal obligations. I have heard this in my constituency surgeries—I suspect others have heard the same. Will the Minister tell us how the Department has been monitoring progress from employers on achieving their legal obligations and what it has done to ensure proper HR training and processes?

Given that people spend on average 90,000 hours at work over a lifetime, the Government must ensure that employers prioritise health and wellbeing in their workplaces. The Government must also put their own house in order. Mental health services are still reeling from decades of poor mental health, such as those caused by bipolar disorder.

5.21 pm

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Housing, Communities and Local Government (Nigel Adams): It is a pleasure, as always, to serve under your chairmanship, Mr Betts. I congratulate my hon. Friend the Member for North Warwickshire (Craig Tracey) on securing this important debate and on putting his point across with such characteristic eloquence.

I was particularly struck by the recognition in the debate that employers and Government both have a stake in the nation’s mental health. The Government provide the necessary health support, offer a safety net when people are out of work and promote the right action in the workplace. However, employers are increasingly recognising that they have a crucial role to play in creating healthy workplaces to enable their employees to remain in work and thrive, providing a supportive environment in which their employees can discuss health issues, and helping people return to work promptly when they fall ill.

Mental health is a matter of national importance. It is particularly relevant this month, following World Mental Health Day on 10 October, during which the Prime Minister announced that the Government are providing £1.8 million over the next four years to cover the cost of calls to the Samaritans helpline. This will enable more people to receive support when they reach out for help.

The Prime Minister is personally committed to improving mental health services and addressing one of the most burning injustices in our society. As we have heard, the Government are backing that up by investing record levels in mental health, with annual spending reaching just under £12 billion last year. In addition, the Prime Minister announced a five-year funding settlement, which will see the NHS budget grow by more than £20 billion a year in real terms in the next five years. In return, she has asked the NHS to develop a long-term plan for the next 10 years. She has been clear that mental health needs to be a key element of that.

Financial difficulties can have a serious detrimental impact on mental health, but mental health problems can devastate our finances, too. As we heard from the hon. Member for Dewsbury (Paula Sherriff), one in four people who suffer from mental health problems may have debt problems as well. Supporting people with their financial resilience is vital. We are committed to addressing issues faced by people who fall into problem debt. This year, the Government commissioned the Money Advice Service and spent just over £56 million to provide help to more than 530,000 people.

The NHS provides some services to people who may be experiencing the symptoms of debt problems or financial difficulties. Mental health services, including improving access to psychological therapies, may also signpost patients to debt advice services as part of their care. In our 2017 manifesto, we committed to developing a breathing space scheme for people in problem debt.

The Government also continue to invest in mental health-related trials and studies. These include doubling the number of employment advisers in IAPT services and launching a £4.2 million challenge fund to build the evidence base of what works to support people with mental health conditions, as well as musculoskeletal conditions.

The good news is that staying in or returning to work after a period of mental ill health can help mental health recovery. Good work supports our good health. It keeps us healthy, mentally and physically. It enables
us to be economically independent and gives us more choices and opportunities to fulfil our other ambitions in life. Our Command Paper, “Improving lives: the future of work, health and disability”, which was published jointly by the Department of Health and Social Care and the Department for Work and Pensions last November, sets out a comprehensive strategy for achieving the Government’s challenging target of ensuring that 1 million more disabled people are in work by 2027.

Given the scale of this ambition, a key part of our programme is to achieve transformational change by focusing action on three key areas: welfare, workplace and health. We have made good progress. Employment rates are at historic highs and the number of disabled people in work reached 3.5 million in 2017, having increased by nearly 600,000 since 2013. The Government recognise the crucial role of employers in creating mentally healthy workplaces. Too many people fall out of work because of their mental health. We are asking employers to do more to prevent that.

That is why, as we heard from my hon. Friend the Member for North Warwickshire, in January 2017 the Prime Minister commissioned Lord Dennis Stevenson and Paul Farmer, the chief executive of Mind, to conduct an independent review into how employers can better support all employees, including those with mental ill health or wellbeing. The review set out a compelling case for action, with the central recommendation that all employers should adopt a set of six core mental health standards to encourage an open and transparent organisational culture that supports employees’ mental health. Those standards included developing mental health awareness among employees, encouraging open conversations about mental health and routinely monitoring employee mental health and wellbeing.

The review went further by recommending that all public sector employers, and private sector companies with more than 500 employees, deliver mental health enhanced standards, including increasing transparency and accountability through internal and external reporting. We have made progress with implementation and are developing with partners, including employers, a framework for voluntary reporting on mental health and disability. We will publish supporting guidance, including on the important issue of how to encourage employees to disclose health issues.

It will take time before we can call all of our workplaces truly healthy and inclusive, but we have been encouraged by the level of engagement and commitment to this agenda. Momentum is building around the challenge to all employers to adopt the core standards that lay the basic foundations for good workplace mental health, and to larger businesses to adopt the enhanced standards. Following the Prime Minister’s acceptance of the Stevenson-Farmer recommendations as they apply to the NHS and the civil service as major employers, both organisations are making progress.

Working in partnership is vital. The Government recognise the collaborative approach that has created the new mental health at work gateway, which is aimed at employers and trade unions. It allows employers and trade unions to access resources and advice, to help them to support a colleague, challenge the stigma or learn more about mental health in the workplace. Looking at the wider system in which employers make decisions, the Government are committed to reforming the current system of statutory sick pay so that it supports more flexible working, which can help people to return to work after a period of sickness.

I will use this opportunity to take a moment to address some of the points raised by hon. Members in the debate. I will come on to my hon. Friend the Member for North Warwickshire shortly. The hon. Member for Strangford (Jim Shannon), who gave a characteristically eloquent exposition of the issues, talked about employees sharing responsibility. I could not agree more, and nor could the Government. Employers have a key role to play in creating good working conditions and providing supportive line management so that people have the opportunity to speak out about issues and keep in contact with employees. I was encouraged by what he said about ensuring that his own staff took breaks and had some downtime during the working day.

It is also important that we keep in contact with employees who happen to go off sick. The Government have worked with Mind to produce a new website resource, and we are reviewing current obligations and incentives to see what we can do to encourage more good behaviour. The hon. Gentleman talked about suicide prevention; as hon. Members will be aware, on World Mental Health Day the Prime Minister announced not only the appointment of my hon. Friend the Member for Thurrock (Jackie Doyle-Price) as Minister for suicide prevention, but, as I mentioned earlier, almost £2 million to cover the costs of calls to the Samaritans helpline, where there will be help for people who reach out.

The hon. Gentleman also talked about parity of esteem for mental and physical health. It was this Government who legislated for parity of esteem by making mental and physical health an equal responsibility for the NHS in the Health and Social Care Act 2012. We are also backing our commitment with a significant increase in funding.

We are all extremely delighted to see the hon. Member for Motherwell and Wishaw (Marion Fellows) in her place, and it was a genuine pleasure to hear from her. It takes enormous courage to admit that one has suffered mental health problems, so to hear that from the hon. Lady was incredibly moving, and it was a privilege to be in the Chamber for that moment. It is important that employers create the right supportive environment. One thing we are doing is investing to make sure that there are 1 million mental health first-aiders in the workplace, which is crucial.

The hon. Lady talked about the impact of low wages, and I agree with her. That is why we introduced the national living wage and are providing in-work financial support through tax credits and now through universal credit. That also makes it easier for people to move in and out of work, removing difficult transitions. She mentioned work capability assessments; it is true that they are designed to determine benefit eligibility, but they should not be viewed in isolation. We provide personalised and tailored support through work coaches in our jobcentres.

Moving on to the remarks of the hon. Member for Dewsbury, I politely and gently remind her that the funding picture in the NHS is not quite so gloomy as she painted it. We are backing our commitments with some significant funding increases in this space. We have record levels of investment in mental health, with
annual spending reaching just under £12 billion just last year. The Prime Minister, as I have mentioned, has announced a five-year funding settlement. That is not the picture that the hon. Lady paints.

Paula Sherriff: How would the Minister respond to the professionals I speak to every single week, who tell me that mental health services—particularly child and adolescent services—are in crisis; that on some weekends there is not a single psychiatric bed available in the country; and that people are travelling up to 300 miles to get an inpatient psychiatric bed? Perhaps there are positives out there, but it is difficult to say that things are not so gloomy when that is what I hear every week.

Nigel Adams: The hon. Lady makes a fair point. The need to travel hundreds of miles out of area, in some cases, for inpatient treatment is something that we desperately need to tackle, and we are tackling it. That is why we are putting in the investment. I gently remind her again of the additional £20 billion a year in real terms for the NHS over the next five years. Nobody is saying that this is a perfect situation, but we are matching our words with real-terms cash and investing a further £1.4 billion for mental health services for children and young people, which I am sure she would support.

We briefly mentioned the Stevenson-Farmer report, and I remind the hon. Lady that we responded in full through the “Improving Lives: the Future of Work, Health and Disability” Command Paper and fully supported all 40 recommendations of the Stevenson-Farmer review. Progress is being made, and has been made, on implementing those recommendations.

My hon. Friend the Member for North Warwickshire raised the role that the insurance industry can play. We recognise the positive aspects of group income protection for helping to retain sick employees, in particular access to expert-led health services and the financial certainty it offers individuals. I am not entirely sure that the product is widely known out there in the business space; I have run businesses for the last 20-odd years and was not aware that such insurance products were available. I very much hope that my former colleagues are tuned in to this precise moment and will do some research on it.

GIP is clearly a product that works well for those employees who choose to buy it, and we encourage the industry to continue to promote its benefits. I am sure that the Association of British Insurers is doing a good job of that. However, we believe that small and medium-sized enterprises, in particular, lack sufficient incentives to invest in GIP as it is currently structured, because they often choose not to offer sick pay for periods beyond statutory requirements. That is why we have been looking more broadly at incentives and obligations on employers. We will continue to engage with the industry, and I know that the ABI will play a big role in that as well. We are listening closely to employers’ views about the appropriate products that retain the positive aspects of GIP and that overcome the existing barriers to increasing take-up.

By working with our partners, including employers, the Government can continue to tackle poor mental health, ensuring that disabled people, and people with physical and mental health conditions, go as far as their talents can take them.

5.38 pm

Craig Tracey: I thank every Member here for their contribution and for the general spirit of the debate. It has been conducted in the way that I hoped it would be. It is clear that we all want to see progress on this matter.

The hon. Member for Strangford (Jim Shannon) made some excellent comments, as usual. His arguments complemented those that I put forward, particularly on the role that companies can play. However, it is important that we give companies the tools—whether through Government action, insurance products or whatever else—to allow them to play that role. He also mentioned a critical point about encouraging people to come forward and share their health issues.

I also thank the Opposition Front-Benchers for their comments—particularly the hon. Member for Motherwell and Wishaw (Marion Fellows), who shared her experience. Only if people come forward and share their experiences will others understand that they are not the only ones to have such feelings. That can happen to us all, and such case studies are the best way to help us to progress. No strategy will work without people coming forward; it is a two-way street. I will particularly reflect on the hon. Lady’s comments about teaching resilience, particularly to younger people. That is important, not only in these matters but throughout their lives in general.

I also thank the Minister. We are all pleased to hear that good progress is being made and that good, positive steps are being taken. I appreciate as well as anybody that there is no quick fix to this issue, but the Government are taking it forward and driving it. Steps such as getting more people into work are critical to doing that. However, the more people in work, the greater the potential for people to suffer from these difficulties. It is important to recognise the issue and provide solutions and tools to enable business to combat it.

It is key that we, as Back-Bench Members, continue to push this issue and encourage the Government to keep it at the forefront of their thinking. At the end of the day, tackling it will bring a benefit not only to employers and the people affected but to the overall success of our economy and our country.

Question put and agreed to.

Resolved,

That this House has considered the financial effect of absence from work due to mental health problems.

5.41 pm

Sitting adjourned.
It is absolutely vital that we continue the fight to ensure that those diagnosed with breast cancer live, but we must also fight to improve their quality of life. About 70% of women with breast cancer experience severe night sweats and hot flushes, which cause major physical discomfort and anxiety, and affect their confidence. In some cases, they can even lead to serious sleep deprivation. Such problems can persist for many years. The severe and persistent symptoms of menopause are one of the main factors contributing to women discontinuing their treatment. Given that doing so can increase the chance that their breast cancer will come back, we have simply got to take this issue seriously.

What can be done? Professor Fenlon of Swansea University believes that cognitive behavioural therapy can help to ease physical symptoms, and is leading a clinical trial to assess how feasible it would be to train breast cancer nurses to deliver it. If clinical trials deem it to be effective, it has the potential to improve the quality of life of half a million women living with or beyond breast cancer in the UK, so I urge the Government to provide the NHS with resources to make the programme available in all our hospitals.

That brings me to the next issue I want to focus on: the geographical inequality in treatments and related services. It is important that the advances that I hope we are about to make in this area benefit everyone. The main CCG covering my constituents is NHS South Cheshire. I am proud to say that it was recently rated outstanding based on four pan-cancer measures, including waiting times, one-year survival rates and patient experience.

However, the report by the all-party parliamentary group on breast cancer states that there is a postcode lottery for breast cancer outcomes. All hon. Members will agree that it is simply unacceptable that women in some areas are more than twice as likely to die prematurely as women who are treated elsewhere. My CCG is set to merge with three others in the near future, and I want to ensure that my constituents continue to see waiting times fall, survival rates rise and the patient experience improve. I was shocked to read that women in some areas are one third less likely to have attended breast cancer screenings in the past three years than women living in other parts of the country.

Patients have had issues accessing off-patent drugs such as bisphosphonates, which were originally licensed for the treatment of osteoporosis but were discovered to be effective in preventing breast cancer recurrence in some post-menopausal women. When CCGs were asked last year whether they routinely fund bisphosphonates for that purpose, only 42—20%—said that they did. At the time, South Cheshire CCG said it was not doing so. I hope that the situation has improved, given that the National Institute for Health and Care Excellence has recently published updated clinical guidelines that recommend bisphosphonates. I am currently waiting to hear back from South Cheshire CCG. Is there an opportunity for the Government to make some specific interventions in the NHS long-term plan to prevent more cases of secondary breast cancer?

There is currently little incentive for manufacturers to license off-patent drugs for new uses in breast cancer. Breast Cancer Now is calling on the Government to introduce a catalyst fund in the NHS long-term plan to provide that incentive. That would make it quicker and easier for patients routinely to access cheap off-patent
drugs. Breast Cancer Now commissioned York Health Economics Consortium to model how many lives we could save if the best outcomes were reached everywhere. It found that more than 1,100 lives could have been saved in 2016 if all CCGs in England had been able to reduce their mortality rates to match the lowest. Geographical inequality is not just an issue of principle; we have the potential to save lives, and if we save only one life, does that not make it worth addressing?

I would be grateful to hear from the Minister about the steps he is taking to facilitate the sharing of best practice between cancer alliances to reduce those variations. What conversations has he had with the Chancellor and his Treasury colleagues to ensure the long-term funding of cancer alliances?

If cancer alliances are properly to invest in the future of services and plan strategically, we must provide them with multi-year budgets. The APPG’s report on geographical inequality highlights that there are still worrying gaps in data collection, including in relation to the number of people living with secondary breast cancer. It is absolutely essential that we improve the cancer dashboard with more detailed performance data. After all, identifying and understanding these inequalities is the first step towards addressing them.

1.39 pm

Huw Merriman (Bexhill and Battle) (Con): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Mr McCabe. I thank the hon. Member for Crewe and Nantwich (Laura Smith) for leading the debate with such care, passion and expertise. It is a great pleasure to note that the three Front-Bench spokespeople—the Under-Secretary of State for Health and Social Care, my hon. Friend the Member for Winchester (Steve Brine), the hon. Member for Washington and Sunderland West (Mrs Hodgson) and the hon. Member for Central Ayrshire (Dr Whitford)—have all served as chairs of the all-party parliamentary group on breast cancer. It is a rarity for all three Front-Bench spokespeople to have so much knowledge and, indeed, to care so much about the issue that they have spent their time campaigning on it in Parliament. I salute all three of them for their work on this matter and I very much look forward their contributions.

The statistics are well known and well rehearsed, but I want to put them on record. In the UK, 55,000 women and 350 men are diagnosed with breast cancer every year. Sadly, one in eight women will be diagnosed with breast cancer, 35,000 women are living with secondary breast cancer, and nearly 1,000 women die from breast cancer every month. Nearly 700,000 people in the UK are living either with or beyond breast cancer treatment. The positive that we can look at now is that 80% of women survive for five years or more. The title of the debate on the Order Paper, “Future of breast cancer”, is crucial, because it is all about the future. The progress made so far has been absolutely extraordinary, but we must not rest on that progress; we must look further forward and do even more, as science and medical developments allow us to.

I would probably have trotted out those statistics a couple of years ago when speaking on this matter, because it impacts on my constituents. However, personal experience of a loved one being struck down with breast cancer makes me more determined to be here to represent their cause and that of the thousands of women across the country who have to go through the same experience. I salute the courage and bravery of all who have been diagnosed with breast cancer and who have gone through the treatment. To watch those people undertake that brave journey is a humbling experience, because when I saw it with my own eyes, I thought, “Could I actually do this? Would I have the bravery and the strength to go through this myself?” It was the most extraordinary experience for me to see that.

I pay tribute to all the carers and those who provide support. They feel helpless, at times, and they wish that they could go through the wretched experience instead. They would do anything to change places, but they cannot. Those people do the most amazing job. On behalf of those who have been through the treatment, I salute all the brave families, friends and loved ones who went through it with them. The inner strength that their support must give to sufferers is absolutely tremendous.

Breast screening uptake is at its lowest level for 10 years, which is very concerning. Uptake is at 71%; the aim is to make that figure at least 80%, which would save 1,200 lives per year. If the Minister has time, I would like him to reassure us that the Government will take action in their attempt to reach that target. Screening is, of course, still age-based, and it was sad for me to note that the entry-level screening age would have been too high for the family member I referred to, who was only 42 when they were diagnosed.

It is incredibly exciting to meet groups such as Breast Cancer Now, which is carrying out a generation study, following 113,000 women from the UK over 40 years. I was absolutely blessed and fascinated to meet the people involved in that study at a recent all-party parliamentary group meeting. Of course, age is one profile, but we need to look at high-risk scenarios and investigate the genetic, lifestyle and environmental factors that can change the likelihood of a woman developing breast cancer. That study, which I think is exciting, identifies 160 common genetic changes associated with the development of breast cancer, as well as showing how various life events—such as the menopause—and lifestyle factors can have a great impact. The future is bright, because rather than just looking at age ranges, we are now really going into the detail with those studies to show how certain factors can lead to risk and then, where there is risk, providing screening. That is hugely important.

I paid tribute to those who go through breast cancer treatment and to their carers, who go through it with them, but I also want to touch on the phenomenal work that NHS staff do for everyone who goes through that journey. I thank them; they are the most extraordinary people, in terms of their sheer intelligence. It is incredibly reassuring to meet such bright, dedicated people. The other great thing about them is that they deal with everything in black and white—there is no messing around—and tell people exactly what is going on. It can sometimes be stark, but it reassures people that they are being led to the right conclusion.

Of course, there are workload impacts. We know that the NHS faces challenges, and cancer departments absolutely share those challenges. A Macmillan Cancer Support survey from last year highlighted the increased workloads, complex patient needs and vacancies in key
roles that are putting pressure on the cancer care workforce. Certainly, in my experience with the Maidstone and Tunbridge Wells NHS Trust, the staff were absolutely phenomenal. When things did not work, it was often because they did not have what is called back-office support. As a result, consultants have to run around doing admin work instead of focusing on their medical and clinical expertise, making them very expensive and overqualified admin resources. We often talk quite clinically about back-office savings, but perhaps we need to look very carefully before making such savings if they will have an impact on frontline services.

Some of the NHS communications systems can be incredibly clunky. Finding out via Royal Mail that one has an appointment after the appointment is due is to take place—not just once, but twice—is maddening. These days, we embrace technology. We are told about dentist appointments via text messages to which we can respond to confirm, and the NHS should be doing the same thing. Before my journey with breast cancer, I was critical of people who missed appointments, but I had not reflected that people might miss appointments because they have not been told that they are taking place. It is maddening for consultants, because once people have received their notification, they are not even required to reply to confirm that they will attend their appointment. Of course, no one in the hospital thinks, “Someone has not got back to me; perhaps they have not received the letter.” We sat waiting in the hospital for hours, because the system did not know we were there despite the fact that we had booked in. That is maddening for patients, and maddening for consultants and staff.

Such issues may seem quite trivial, but they caused me to go back to the hospital to meet the heads of service to ensure that I could convey the concerns of frontline staff to senior management. I thought that that was the least I could do after the care and attention that the staff had given us.

I therefore ask my hon. Friend the Minister to think about the support staff, the systems that are in place and how we can better support the staff who help us to get better. I express my immense gratitude for those people and the support, expertise and help that they provide, not just during the treatment but on the journey beyond. That is the other thing that I have noticed: once a patient is given the all-clear, which is the best news, all of a sudden they face another journey, on which they will not necessarily be with clinicians. They will still have support staff from organisations such as Macmillan, who take great care of people.

I find myself speaking from experience, having been on an incredible journey that taught me a great deal about those who go through cancer and those who care for us through cancer. It has made me vow that I will always do everything I can in Parliament to try to make the situation better. I look forward to those on the Front Benches reassuring us that they will do the same.

1.49 pm

Karen Lee (Lincoln) (Lab): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Mr McCabe.

I thank my hon. Friend the Member for Crewe and Nantwich (Laura Smith), my good friend, for introducing this debate. It is vital for us to have the opportunity to discuss the future of breast cancer care and treatment. I also place on the record my thanks to Breast Cancer Now, a fantastic organisation without which this debate would not be possible. I am an ambassador for Breast Cancer Now.

As people probably know by now, in 2010 my daughter, aged 35, was diagnosed with triple negative breast cancer. She was dead within 13 months. When I first came to Parliament, one of my aims was to do anything I could to ensure that that did not happen to other people and whatever I could to make things better.

This month is Wear it Pink Month. The timing of the debate could not be better—in Breast Cancer Awareness Month, with a new cancer strategy announced by the Prime Minister at her recent party conference and while the long-term economic plan for the NHS is being decided. This is an unprecedented opportunity to ensure that the way in which we prevent, diagnose and treat breast cancer, and care for those who have it, truly benefits all patients in every part of the country.

Every year about 55,000 people in the UK are diagnosed with breast cancer, making it the most common cancer in the country. One in eight women in the UK will develop breast cancer in their lifetime, and nearly 11,500 women and 80 men in the UK still lose their lives to breast cancer each year. Progress has been made, but survival outcomes vary significantly between regions across the country, and Britain continues to trail other European countries on breast cancer survival. As Members can imagine, that sort of statistic hits home with me.

Debates such as this one, along with the necessary commitments from the Government, are crucial if we are to work towards a future in which everyone with breast cancer can live, and live well. After three decades of progress in the UK, however, within four years the number of women dying from breast cancer each year is projected to rise, according to recent analysis. We have to address that—an increase simply cannot be allowed to happen.

What we need is action; we do not need platitudes or promises, because neither of those leads to improvements in care. We need some real action. I appreciate that the hon. Member for Bexhill and Battle (Huw Merriman) means well, and it is all very well to praise NHS staff, but at the end of the day we cannot spend a pat on the back. Someone needs to go back to the Prime Minister to tell her that we actually need to pay NHS staff properly.

Incidence rates are projected to increase in the next decade, but waiting times still vary widely, screening attendance is at a record low, secondary patient needs are still too often unmet, and the quality of care still depends far too much on where someone happens to live. My daughter did not have a cancer clinical nurse specialist, a CNS, and when her cancer metastasised—she was diagnosed at the end of April—and it metastasised by the following February—she tried to get her GP to visit her. The GP lived quite a distance away and would not come out; even after I made a number of phone calls, she still would not come out.

My daughter lay in that bedroom with a cancer metastasising to her brain, but only had paracetamol and ibuprofen to take because she could not get a doctor out to her. Had she had a CNS, that would not have happened. For women to get nursing from a cancer specialist is crucial. Again, I know that the hon. Member
for Bexhill and Battle means well, but seeing that and having to care for someone in that position did not give me inner strength—it broke my heart, and I hope that it never happens to anyone ever again.

It is not too late to prevent the projected decline in breast cancer survival rates. For example, were 10% of breast cancers diagnosed a stage earlier, an estimated 290 lives could be saved in just one year. My daughter could have been one of those. It is therefore vital that we raise awareness. A couple of weeks ago, I went out to our local shopping centre, the Waterside. My office manager and I had loads of leaflets from Breast Cancer Now—the little ones, which tell people how to check their breasts—and a stack of chocolate brownies that my younger daughter had made. I have to say that the leaflets went faster than the chocolate brownies, but we gave it all out in the end.

We could also prevent more than 1,200 breast cancer deaths by increasing breast screening uptake from the current low of 71% to the 80% standard set for breast screening units. Those figures show that if the Government act now, and act decisively, progress can continue to be made, more lives can be saved and quality of life can be improved.

The progress made on breast cancer over the years masks stark regional inequalities in diagnosis, treatment and care across the country. Having worked in our NHS, I am so proud of the values of universality, equality and fairness that are hardwired into the delivery of life-saving care. Under our national health service, your postcode should have no bearing on the care you receive.

Last Friday, I visited Lincoln’s breast unit and saw the brilliant staff doing an amazing job. To do such a fantastic job, they often leave late at night. They have an answerphone, so people can ring up and leave a message if they are worried about anything. Those girls do not go home at night until they have emptied all the messages on that machine—it does not matter what time it is, or if they were meant to have gone home an hour ago: they stay. I do not think they get paid for staying.

In Lincoln, the average incidence rate for breast cancer is slightly above the English average. Most worrying, however, is that Lincoln’s premature mortality rate was higher than the English average, and significantly higher than that of the neighbouring area of North Lincolnshire.

Having worked at first hand on hospital wards—I am an ex-nurse—I know how essential it is for patients, staff and quality of care that teams are appropriately staffed, and that regular, trained nurses are working—not agency staff. Staff should be in an area all the time, so they know what they are looking for, and to do that we need the reinstatement of nursing bursaries. That does not only go for nurses; we need them for radiographers as well, because the people who do the mammograms need three years of training in radiography and then an extra year on top of that. I was told that only last week, and there is a real shortage of them. The Government talk about their apprenticeships, but it takes four years to train an apprentice nurse, and people are just not taking up the training.

Only 21% of trusts in England have a dedicated clinical nurse specialist for secondary breast cancer patients. As I said just now, having a CNS is vital, so that is a shockingly bad statistic. Our dedicated NHS staff work around the clock to provide expert care. The minimum that they deserve is not to have to worry about filling the gaps in understaffed departments. I do not know whether people realise, but when nurses go to work in a hospital that is understaffed—that is, most of them—and another ward is short, they can be moved from one ward to another. They are still nurses, but they might not know quite as much about exactly what they are doing. That is really bad. Bursaries need to be reinstated so that we have enough nurses.

The Government must invest £39 million in recruitment to the breast imaging and diagnostic workforce, and they must provide funding for the 120 hospital trusts without a dedicated CNS post. To the first person who asks, “How do we do that in a time of austerity?”, I will say how—fair taxation is how. Every year, 23% of breast cancer cases could be avoided by simple lifestyle changes but, owing to austerity, public health budgets in 2017-18 were 5% less in real terms than they were in 2013-14. Over the same period, this Government have reduced corporation tax and taxes for the very rich.

The cut in public health budgets drastically reduces the capacity of local public health services to deliver life-saving preventive action. Not only is underfunding local public health services putting people’s lives at risk, but cost-cutting measures fail on their own terms. Investing in public health locally would not only save lives but result in long-term savings for our NHS. It is therefore essential that the NHS long-term plan secures the future of cancer alliances through a continued commitment of at least £200 million per year, in line with inflation, that the Minister will make a real commitment to that. I do not want to hear how we all have to live within our means: we can do that and we ought to do it.

To conclude, it is fantastic to see this crucial debate receive the participation and thoughtful consideration that it deserves. I hope that the Government take on board the excellent range of proposals from Members in all parts of the House. Breast cancer is, after all, an issue that affects all of us. It would be a travesty if we allowed decades of progress to be undone, especially when the pathway to continued improvement is already laid out.

I urge the Government to support fully the delivery of breast cancer diagnosis, treatment and care. Ever since I was elected, I have wanted to work towards a future in which everyone with breast cancer can live, and live well. Breast Cancer Now has a pledge: that by this year, 54% of breast cancers diagnosed at stage I, and 83% at stage II. That is a shockingly bad statistic. Our dedicated NHS staff work around the clock to provide expert care. The minimum that they deserve is not to have to worry about filling the gaps in understaffed departments. I do not know whether people realise, but when nurses go to work in a hospital that is understaffed—that is, most of them—and another ward is short, they can be moved from one ward to another. They are still nurses, but they might not know quite as much about exactly what they are doing. That is really bad. Bursaries need to be reinstated so that we have enough nurses.

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1.58 pm

Jim Shannon (Strangford) (DUP): It is always a pleasure to speak in any health debates—as my party’s health spokesperson, I am interested in them—but it is particularly pleasing to speak in this debate. I thank the hon. Member for Crewe and Nantwich (Laura Smith) for presenting the case so well and, through having secured the debate, giving us other MPs the opportunity to make a contribution. It is also always a pleasure to follow the hon. Member for Lincoln (Karen Lee). All of
us in the Chamber today, or who were in the main Chamber when she spoke on this topic some time ago, will remember her contributions. I thank her for them.

I am pleased that we again have an opportunity to highlight breast cancer issues while we have the Minister’s attention. We all know he is deeply interested in this subject, and we look forward to his response. I also look forward to the contribution by the shadow Minister, the hon. Member for Sunderland West (Mrs Hodgson), because I know she has an interest in the subject, too. There may be few of us here, but I know everyone’s contribution will be significant.

Some 55,000 people in the UK are diagnosed with breast cancer every year. Breast Cancer Now’s new 55000Reasons campaign calls for investment in breast cancer to feature in the NHS’s long-term plan. That beseechment is worthy of the Minister’s attention. Some 11,500 women and 80 men in the UK still lose their lives to breast cancer every year. I know men are a smaller proportion of sufferers, but we sometimes forget that they can be susceptible to breast cancer; I was given a salient reminder of that while researching for the debate. We sometimes do not think about that, but we should be aware of it.

Dr Philippa Whitford (Central Ayrshire) (SNP): Does the hon. Gentleman recognise that although far fewer men suffer from breast cancer, because services—particularly support services—are designed for women, men often delay coming forward with concerns and find it difficult to access support? Because they still see breast cancer as a women’s issue, they are almost afraid to be open about it.

Jim Shannon: As always, the hon. Lady makes an intelligent contribution; I do not mean to say that nobody else does, but she always brings her knowledge of her subject to our debates. I told her beforehand that I looked forward to her contribution, because, as always, it will be full of information we can learn from.

The hon. Lady is right: as the men present will know, we hide our health problems. We do not go to the doctor as often as we should. We just grin and bear it—except in the case of man flu, when we are probably dying almost before it starts. I should not be facetious—that is not right. I am just saying we do not react in the way we should. As the hon. Lady said, when we do go to the health service, the services are not there. We need to address that.

Between 2012 and 2016, an average of 66 women a year were diagnosed with breast cancer in the Strangford constituency. On average, 20 of those women—almost 30%—lost their battle with breast cancer in each of those years. As the MP for Strangford, that puts the issue into perspective for me, but it also tells me that the survival rate is not as good as we would like. The hon. Member for Bexhill and Battle (Huw Merriman) referred to earlier diagnosis, which I will come to. That statistic represents 20 homes deprived of a mother, a daughter, a sister, an aunt or a friend.

Outcomes vary tremendously among clinical commissioning groups. We continue to lag behind other European countries, such as Sweden, Portugal, Malta, Germany and France, on breast cancer survival. Projections indicate that if current trends continue and we do not address the increase in the number of people diagnosed with the disease, the number of breast cancer deaths will begin to increase within four years. I know the Minister has a cancer strategy in place and is addressing these issues, but perhaps he will indicate what is happening.

Those projections are shocking when we consider how far cancer diagnostics and treatment have progressed. My colleague the hon. Member for North Down (Lady Hermon) told me this week that a good friend of hers—a 42-year-old—has just died from cancer. Again, the reality is pertinent for us all.

I said to the hon. Member for Crewe and Nantwich that these debates always seem to come at the time when we can relate to them best. A very good friend of our family was diagnosed with breast cancer and is going through all the radiotherapy treatment. She has lost all her hair, as so often happens, and wears a scarf. The treatment is quite harsh. She is a friend of my son and the wife, and she works just down the road from us. Her employers have been good with her—they have ensured that she can at least do some part-time work. It is important for people to have something to focus their mind on when things are difficult.

Breast cancer is no respecter of the person. The large number of people affected by it means that even seemingly incremental changes have a huge potential to save more lives. Before I highlight some of the Breast Cancer Now recommendations, let me thank the Library for its work on the excellent briefing for the debate, which outlines the things we need, including public awareness and screening. It states:

“On 2 May 2018 the Secretary of State for Health and Social Care reported to Parliament a serious failure in the national breast screening programme in England and announced an independent review to investigate.”

Again, perhaps the Minister will indicate where we are with that review.

I underline the need for access to breast cancer drugs for people who are going through the most difficult times. We all know it is not just the patient who suffers—their family suffer, too. The hon. Member for Lincoln referred to that in a very personal way, which we all understand. The cancer care strategy refers to earlier diagnosis. One of its priorities is:

“A shift towards faster testing and responding more quickly to patients who present with symptoms. A target that by 2020, 95% of patients referred by a GP will be definitively diagnosed and receive test results within four weeks.”

If we reach that wonderful target, we will certainly be going the right way.

I often say to the hon. Member for Central Ayrshire, (Dr Whitford) who speaks for the Scottish National party, that she genuinely—she knows I mean this—brings a wealth of knowledge to our debates. I also tell her that, in many cases, Scotland leads the way with some of its health strategies and plans. We should look at its cancer strategy, which was published in 2016 and deals with prevention, detection, diagnosis and treatment—and aftercare, too, which is so important.

People who suffer from breast cancer often worry about financial issues, because they have a mortgage to pay and a family to look after, and sometimes the lady is the breadwinner. We must have all those things in place, so I encourage the Minister to look at Scotland’s cancer strategy, which I know the hon. Lady will refer to, probably in some detail. We look forward to that.
The excellent Breast Cancer Now recommendations include: specific lifestyle interventions; optimising the screening programme through increased uptake; strengthening the workforce; introducing new technologies; developing a screening programme tailored to an individual’s risk so cancers may be detected earlier; and reducing variation by reinforcing the position and ambition of cancer alliances. We will do this better if we do it together—I often say we are better together in everything. We can certainly learn from one another.

We should provide long-term funding and look at funding specific CNS posts to support secondary breast cancer patients in trusts where there is not a dedicated secondary CNS. We should ensure access to clinically effective drugs at a price that is affordable for the NHS. Let us have a price system. The Minister knows about the issues with the price structure for some drugs, and I know he is pursuing that matter so we get good drugs at a fair price.

I will take the time to list Breast Cancer Now’s recommendations. Its first priority is to fund “specific interventions to prevent the 23% of breast cancer cases that are attributable to lifestyle factors in England every year.”

We should address the avoidable cancers.

The second priority is:

“Prevent over 1,200 breast cancer deaths by increasing breast screening uptake from the current decade low of 71.1% to the 80% standard set for breast screening units.”

It is so important to have that in place.

The third priority is:

“Urgently invest £39 million in recruitment to the breast imaging and diagnostic workforce to enable breast services to cope with increasing demand over the next ten years.”

I welcome, as we all should, the Government’s commitment to spend an extra £20 billion on health; it is a step in the right direction and it is quite a commitment.

The fourth priority is:

“Adopt new technologies, such as tomosynthesis and Artificial Intelligence, into the breast screening and symptomatic services as soon as proven effective.”

The fifth priority is:

“Transform breast screening to risk stratified screening to spearhead the prevention and earlier diagnosis of breast cancer over the next ten years based on evidence as it emerges.”

As evidence indicates the trends and how to respond to them, we should make the changes to make that happen.

The sixth priority is:

“Ensure that innovative, clinically effective cancer treatments are quickly available to NHS patients at a price that is fair and affordable, including by reviewing the NICE appraisal methodology.”

The seventh priority is:

“Introduce a Catalyst Fund worth £3 million to incentivise generic manufacturers to make it quicker and easier for patients to routinely access cheap, off-patent drugs found to be effective in new uses.”

The eighth priority is:

“Fund new Clinical Nurse Specialist posts to support secondary breast cancer patients in over 120 Hospital Trusts without a dedicated post.”

Those things can make a difference.

The hardest thing is to tell a patient, “It’s back.” To have a nurse to support her, who she knows from five or three years ago, is a big contribution. At our hospital, there was a conscious decision not to have a separate nurse—if a patient got sent to her, that would be a bad sign—but to have the nurse they already knew.

Jim Shannon: The hon. Lady is right and I accept that we should look at what is being done in Scotland. If there is a better way of doing something, let us do it that way.

The ninth priority is:

“Improve the Cancer Dashboard by including more detailed data on performance across Cancer Alliance geographies to identify inequalities within and between Alliances.”

It would be remiss of us all not to thank the charities, which work so hard. We all know them and I will mention just a few I am aware of: Cancer Focus Northern Ireland; CancerCare; and Marie Curie—I met a Marie Curie lady at the Northern Ireland Affairs Committee yesterday. I know Marie Curie’s work because some of my constituents have been referred there in the last month. Its end-of-life care is incredible, as is that of Macmillan Cancer Support.

We need a plan of action and we must have the funding for that plan of action to be put into place. I support so fervently the English reforms that the Minister will put forward, in the hope that the ethos and the funding for my constituents will follow. We are in a different place in Northern Ireland; health is a devolved matter and the responsibility falls under the Northern Ireland Assembly; but it is not functioning correctly at this moment. Men and women need to know that there is a way forward, to ensure that no one dies of breast cancer anywhere in the UK in the not-so-distant future.

2.14 pm

Dr Philippa Whitford (Central Ayrshire) (SNP): I pay tribute to the hon. Member for Crewe and Nantwich (Laura Smith) for securing this debate. I am sorry that it is not more highly subscribed, but it is competing with other debates elsewhere. I also pay tribute to the hon. Member for Bexhill and Battle (Huw Merriman) and particularly to the hon. Member for Lincoln (Karen Lee), whose daughter did not survive. I am sure that that was very difficult for her to speak about; I know she has done so before, and it is very brave of her. I am sure her daughter would be proud.

I declare an interest, which most people know about—I was a breast cancer surgeon for 33 years before coming to this place. Naturally, I am one of the co-chairs of the all-party parliamentary group on breast cancer and I am a Breast Cancer Now ambassador. In my previous life, I was part of its clinical advisory group. In Scotland, I led on developing the quality improvement standards, which we set up in 2000 and which helped to drive up the quality of breast cancer care across Scotland. It was one of the most rewarding periods in my career, because not only did I have the incredible satisfaction that anyone who has worked in the NHS gets from looking after a patient one-to-one—it is an honour to get to do that—but I knew I was contributing every year to...
cranking up the standards across the country. We have annually gathered peer-reviewed data right back to 2003. It has been great to see that driven up.

The subject of the debate is the future of breast cancer, but being such an old, crusty breast cancer surgeon, I could not resist talking a little about where we have come from. When I started as a medical student, the five-year survival rate was 53%; now, it is more than 80%. That is the journey we have made—a huge journey for the patients, too. It just so happened that my first job on qualifying, and the first three units that I worked in over my first three years, were breast cancer units. I learned so much from the patients on the ward.

Those were the old days, when my light week was 75 hours and my heavy week was 132 hours. My bedroom was on the ward, so I had my tea with the breast ladies. I learned so much about what they hated: people undressing them and not covering them up while starting to talk about them; people talking over their heads. I watched women come back from theatre on a trolley, groping themselves—if they had a lot of bandages and a drip, that meant it was cancer, because the diagnosis was done at surgery. They took out the lump; it went to the lab; they looked at it; they phoned the theatre; and the woman had a mastectomy. No breast care nurse, no pre-operative diagnosis, no discussion and no plan.

There were no women surgeons in Scotland at that time; I remember one of my professors saying, “You should do breast surgery.” I thought it was a bit clichéd for a woman surgeon to do breast surgery, but I looked at my three years’ experience and I thought that the experience of those women was so awful that I could not do anything other than make it better. We have transformed that. By the mid-’80s, we were able to diagnose it at a clinic. Lots of breast surgeons were still not interested in having breast care nurses, but I was involved in the research in Glasgow into the critical need for social and psychological support for women who were going through that journey, looking at the impact of mastectomy on women.

Eventually, we learned that we are kind of not stupid. We are not stressed just because we lose a breast, but because we have cancer; we have kids and we want to see them grow up. We understood that there are two sides that create pressure on women: the change to their body image and the simple stress of the disease, and how to support that. We offered reconstruction; eventually, we moved from mastectomy to preserving the breast when we could. We also know that to support a woman psychologically is to be utterly and completely honest—not to be cruel or rude, but utterly honest. If a patient is lied to, whether by a doctor or family member, that creates a barrier. I have always tried to be utterly and totally honest about what we are facing. We should be part of the patient’s team.

In the late ’70s, tamoxifen came in. Scotland did a lot of the research on that and it looked like it did not make a big difference, until they started doing what we now call meta-analysis—putting a lot of studies together and realising that all the little gains were adding up to an awful lot of lives saved. That has been borne out. There is no magic wand that will get rid of breast cancer; it is about early diagnosis, detailed diagnosis, good surgery, good radiotherapy, good chemotherapy, good hormone treatment and good immunotherapy.

We are talking about the future of breast cancer, and genomics and personalised therapies are in all of the briefs. Tamoxifen was one of the first personalised therapies for a solid tumour to come into existence because it worked only for patients with hormone-sensitive cancers: by testing that tumour, we could tell whether tamoxifen would work. As part of the trial way back in the 1980s, the University of Glasgow did a huge amount looking at how we could test to see whether a cancer was hormone-sensitive. We now do it in a much more efficient way, which is much less time-intensive. Of course, Herceptin, which we discussed so much in the 2000s, works only on patients who carry the human epidermal growth factor receptor 2 marker that makes them sensitive to that drug. We already have that personalised medicine, and a test for it.

My MD thesis was in breast cancer immunology. I utterly believe that immunotherapy will dominate the future of cancer treatment because it is so much better tolerated than chemo and often has a much bigger impact. However, the antibody that became Herceptin was discovered in the second half of the ’80s, when I was in the lab—not that lab, but it was the talk of the steamie because it was an utter breakthrough for everyone studying cancer immunology. That drug went into general trial in 2001. In Scotland, we got access to it routinely on the NHS in 2006, and down here, south of the border, it was the following year—20 years from the bench to routine access. That is one of the challenges we will face in the future.

New treatments have come in, including many in the ’90s, with newer chemotherapy in the form of taxanes, new endocrine treatments, better surgery and better staging. All of that has added up to get us over the 80%. However, as was mentioned, our rates are below the European average.

I remember seeing an interesting paper that compared the UK with Denmark: in all the lower stages and less aggressive diseases, the UK held its own comfortably, particularly because way back in 1988 to 1990 we were one of the early adopters of breast screening whereas other European countries came on only in the second half of the 2000s. However, for the people with really aggressive or advanced disease, we were not matching up. That simply comes back to drug access.

We may get the drug discovered. Scotland plays a significant role—we punch above our weight—within life sciences research in taking things forward and finding new drugs. However, I can say, as one who was routinely involved in trials for years, that it is really demoralising to take on all that extra unpaid time to do the paperwork, sit and explain trials to patients only to find that, as soon as that drug is passed and licensed, we do not get access to it any more.

That is one of the challenges. We are talking about all the amazing new treatments that may come over the hill, but we need to look for an utterly different way of trying to bring them onstream and make them affordable for the NHS. We need a different discussion with the pharmaceutical industry. In exchange, we can offer not personalised data but real-world information thanks to having a joined-up national health service in each of our four nations while many other systems in Europe simply do not. Similarly, our cancer registries are highly accurate.
[Dr Philippa Whitford]

We face challenges in the future; it is not just that magical treatments will come. Access to drugs is important—and not just new ones. As the hon. Member for Crewe and Nantwich said, there are off-patent drugs such as bisphosphonates, which are cheap in the scale of things, yet only one in five commissioning groups in England are funding that. In Scotland, it is funded in all health boards—my unit took part in that trial.

The idea that something that protects against bone metastasis or strengthens the bones of those driven into the menopause could prevent the spread of breast cancer in all patients was fantastic. In comparison to all the treatments we use, and the one we would use if that patient were to develop metastasis, frankly the cost-benefit is very positive. That should be driven up in England and made routinely accessible. As the hon. Lady mentioned, the report that looked at variation across England showed shocking postcode prescribing.

One of the biggest challenges we face in general in the NHS right across all four systems is workforce. I mention it all the time. It is a challenge in every single NHS specialty, but we have a particular issue in breast cancer and a particular problem in radiology—the mammographic or MRI scanning diagnosis. Many of the consultants who went into breast cancer when screening was developed all became consultants around the late ’80s and early 90s, and they are all retiring. We are losing a huge cohort, and apparently for every three that retire only two are lined up to replace them. Less than one in five breast screening units report having a full cohort of staff.

Patients cannot be treated in any way if they have not been diagnosed. The issue that led to patients not getting called at the end of breast screening, referred to by the hon. Member for Strangford (Jim Shannon), was partly because of slippage. If those patients had been screened on the correct date, they probably would have been called correctly, but because they slipped past the ages of 70 or 71 without being called, they missed their appointments.

We need to look at that problem, and that includes promoting this specialty. I spent 33 years in it. Yes, sometimes other surgeons are patronising about breast surgery—maybe it is not quite exciting enough for them; there is not enough blood on the floor or enough glamour—but it is one of the most holistic surgical specialties. We look at how to support the patient to recover, getting them back to normal life through exercise, integrating them into their community, providing support groups and having cancer nurse specialists. It is important that those of us in the specialty or who have been in it reach out and attract our younger colleagues to think of it as a life’s job. Cut me through the middle and it’ll still say breast cancer doctor, not MP, and that will never change.

Finally, we do not give remotely enough attention to prevention. The same things that prevent breast cancer will prevent bowel cancer, lung cancer and so many others. The public sometimes get so many conflicting messages, so they go, “Do I drink coffee or not? Do I use a roll-on deodorant or not?” They always say, “There are only five things you need to think about. Don’t do drugs and don’t smoke. If you don’t do either of them, you’ve only got three. They are: keep your booze under control, because we know that contributes directly to breast cancer; watch your diet, because we know that fats and saturated fats in particular contribute to a rise in breast cancer; and be active and healthy.”

If we were to focus much more of our attention on that handful of things that people should do, we could look at reducing the incidence of all of those cancers, whereas they are currently rising. Instead of thinking about hundreds of thousands of pounds at the end of someone’s treatment journey to try to buy another half a year or a year, why do we not try prevention in the first place?

2.28 pm

Mrs Sharon Hodgson (Washington and Sunderland West) (Lab): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Mr McCabe. I thank my hon. Friend the Member for Crewe and Nantwich (Laura Smith) for leading this timely debate during Breast Cancer Awareness Month and for her excellent speech. It is timely because it is on the same day as Baroness Jowell’s moving memorial service, which I attended prior to this debate. I will say more about why that is relevant later.

I also thank other hon. Members for their excellent contributions—the hon. Members for Bexhill and Battle (Huw Merriman), for Central Ayrshire, and I still serve as the vice-chair. That shows how close breast cancer is to the heart of the health spokespersons of each party and how important it is to work in a cross-party, collaborative way on such an important issue.

More women are surviving breast cancer than ever before. Around 95% of women will survive for one year and more than 80% survive for five years or more. However, the UK still lags behind countries such as Sweden, Portugal, Malta, Germany and France. It is clear that there must be done. Many different issues have been mentioned, but I will specifically talk about breast screening, the workforce and prevention, which others have touched on.

We all know how important early diagnosis is to improving the chances of survival. Breast cancer screening has a huge part to play in this, yet uptake is the lowest it has been in ten years, with stark variations across the country. According to Breast Cancer Now, increasing breast screening uptake from the current decade low of 71.1% to the 80% standard set for breast screening units could prevent over 1,200 breast cancer deaths per annual cohort of eligible women. Will the Government
be taking steps to increase breast cancer screening, so that over 1,200 breast cancers deaths can be prevented each year?

The Prime Minister’s commitment as part of the NHS long-term plan to see three out of four cancers detected at an early stage by 2028 included a plan to make screening programmes more accessible and easier to use. Can the Minister elaborate on those plans? Will they include outreach services to groups who are less likely to attend screenings, such as those from certain demographic groups or those with learning disabilities?

Earlier this year it was announced that there had been a serious breast screening invitation error, which meant that over 10 years more than 174,000 women did not receive an invitation to their final breast screening appointment. A review into this error is expected to be published next month. Can the Minister provide an update on that review and is it expected to report on time?

Every year over 55,000 people in the UK are diagnosed with breast cancer, but the failure to address those increasing numbers means that, according to Breast Cancer Care, the number of breast cancer deaths is set to rise within four years. That is why pressure on the workforce needs to be addressed as a matter of urgency. Demand on the breast imaging and diagnostic workforce is set to increase over the next 10 years. We already have a workforce crisis with growing demand, but the problem is only going to get worse if it is left unaddressed. For every three breast radiologists who retire over the next five years, only two are expected to replace them. What plans do the Government have to deal with the growing pressure on an overstretched workforce?

Leaving the EU could also have an impact on our NHS workforce: 5.6% of the NHS workforce in England are from the EU. Changes to immigration rules may exacerbate existing workforce problems for breast cancer patients, particularly among the nursing workforce. Can the Minister provide any clear guarantees to EU citizens working in our NHS? What steps is his Department taking to ensure that the UK continues to attract nurses from the EU?

The current cancer strategy for England includes a recommendation that all patients diagnosed with cancer are supported by a clinical nurse specialist, but this support is not widely available. We heard from my hon. Friend the Member for Lincoln how devastating that is. That support is not widely available. We heard from my hon. Friend the Member for Lincoln how devastating that is. That support is not widely available. We heard from my hon. Friend the Member for Lincoln how devastating that is.

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The challenge to the Minister is whether improvements to the breast cancer workforce will include recruiting and training additional secondary breast cancer nurses, clinical nurse specialists—whatever we may decide to call them—so that patients have the vital support they need and no one has to witness their loved ones suffering in agony, with only over-the-counter painkillers to ease the pain, as my hon. Friend the Member for Lincoln so bravely testified to earlier.

Karen Lee: Does my hon. Friend agree that the withdrawal of nursing bursaries cannot fail to have impacted on the numbers of nurses training? There are figures out today—I have been on the radio this morning. I think there has been more than a 30% drop in the number of people training to be nurses since the nursing bursary was withdrawn. That cannot fail to have had an impact. It impacts on radiographers as well, because they train for three years, then for another year after that to do mammograms. Does she agree that those bursaries absolutely must be reinstated?

Mrs Hodgson: Yes, I agree. Obviously, that is why it is in our manifesto that we would reinstate those nursing bursaries. I would urge the Government to look at this closely, especially in light of Brexit, and what might happen post Brexit, with regard to the EU workforce, as I already mentioned.

Finally, I will move on to prevention. It is a challenge to us all to live healthier lives. I do not stand here saying I am doing a very good job, but we know that regularly drinking alcohol, as the hon. Member for Central Ayrshire mentioned earlier, and being overweight or obese, can increase the risk of developing breast cancer—and most cancers—as can smoking and lack of exercise. Regular physical exercise and reducing all the above can reduce the risk. Researchers estimated that 23% of breast cancers are preventable through lifestyle changes. That means there were approximately 10,600 preventable cases in 2016. Turning that into money, approximately £102 million in treatment costs could have been saved in 2016 if all those cases had been prevented. I know that may not be completely achievable, but since 2015, public
health budgets have been cut by 3.9% a year until 2020-21. Has the Minister made any assessment of the effect that cuts to public health budgets have had on the incidence of breast cancer, and will he commit, as much as he can, to an increase in public health funding to help to prevent more cases of breast cancer? I know that might be above his pay grade; he is not the Chancellor—yet.

In closing, I will touch on secondary breast cancer. More than half of women are given no information about the signs and symptoms of breast cancer returning. Will the Minister look into ensuring that all patients are advised at the end of their primary breast cancer treatment about lifestyle and symptoms, so that where possible all cases of incurable secondary breast cancer can be prevented? I know that, like me, the Minister is incredibly passionate about breast cancer and that he will take much if not all of what he has heard today back to his Department to work on, so that he can achieve the best future for breast cancer.

On the day of Dame Tessa Jowell’s memorial, I will end by quoting from her magnificent last speech in the House of Lords in January this year, when she said:

“In the end, what gives a life meaning is not only how it is lived, but how it draws to a close.”

She said that she hoped the debate would give hope to other cancer patients,

“so that we can live well together with cancer—not just dying of it”—[Official Report, House of Lords, 25 January 2018; Vol. 788, c. 1170.]

Perhaps her most precious legacy will be not only Sure Start and the Olympics, as wonderful as they are, but a better future for everyone with any form of cancer.

2.41 pm

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Health and Social Care (Steve Brine): Thank you for chairing our session today, Mr McCabe. I add my congratulations to the hon. Member for Lincoln (Karen Lee) on securing the debate and the hon. Member for Crewe and Nantwich (Laura Smith) on leading us off today. Breast cancer sadly affects so many of us so personally. It is always a privilege to respond to any debate in this House, especially on cancer and more especially on breast cancer, and this has been a constructive, small and perfectly formed debate.

It is always a pleasure to follow my shadow Minister and friend, the hon. Member for Washington and Sunderland West (Mrs Hodgson); I think this is the first time that a debate has been led by all three chairs of the same all-party parliamentary group, speaking for their respective parties. It was important to us when we chaired the group that we had the three main parties in the chair. The third chair was then held by the Liberal Democrats—remember them?—[Laughter.] Stop it. When the hon. Member for Central Ayrshire (Dr Whitford) joined the House, it was a real pleasure that she came on board and took that seat.

I will start by saying, “Happy BCAM!” There is much to celebrate, as hon. Members have said, and it is Breast Cancer Awareness Month, or BCAM for short. I pay tribute to all the people who are here, the survivors—survivorship is very important—and to all the people who have gone. Macmillan Cancer Support ran a heartfelt campaign earlier this year on the idea that “A mum with cancer is still a mum”, which was one of the best pieces of advertising I have seen in the health space for a long time. The reason I say, “Happy BCAM!” is that the people who have gone were still mums, daughters and sisters, even while they were going through their challenges. That is very important. Even children who lose their battle with cancer after being on this earth for a matter of days leave an indelible mark, because they were here for a few days. It is important to me that we always remember that, and I always do.

The title of today’s debate on the Order Paper is “Future of breast cancer”. The hon. Member for Washington and Sunderland West said to me once in one of our group meetings, “You will be cancer Minister one day.” If she could predict something else great for me, that would be excellent.

Mrs Hodgson: Chancellor.

Steve Brine: Oh yes; the hon. Lady has already said Chancellor today. I am not sure about that one.

As the cancer Minister, I want a future where there is no breast cancer. The hon. Member for Strangford (Jim Shannon) mentioned that, and I think all hon. Members who have contributed this afternoon would like to see a future where there was no breast cancer. One day, perhaps—but the statistics show that we are making good progress. That is why I said that there are things to celebrate. We are ensuring that more people than ever survive breast cancer. As has been said, 10-year survival rates have almost doubled, from around 40% to nearly 80%, in the last 40 years.

I hope I do not need to say it, but cancer is a huge priority—the priority—for me. The Prime Minister chose to make it a central point of her party conference speech this month, and there was a reason for that; it is a huge priority for her and for her Government. Survival rates have never been higher, and they have been increasing year on year. Of course the Prime Minister celebrates that, but it is also why she announced a very ambitious package of measures for cancer care and treatment, showing that cancer will be absolutely central to the long-term plan for the NHS, which she has challenged NHS England to write before the end of this year and of which I will say more later. We are committed to investing an extra £20 billion a year in our NHS. The investment will build on the success we have already achieved through the implementation of the cancer strategy for England. I pay tribute to Harpal Kumar and those at Cancer Research UK who put that strategy together. We will build on that legacy and take it forward into the long-term plan.

In opening the debate, the hon. Member for Crewe and Nantwich raised a number of good points. She talked about secondary breast cancer data collection—a number of people did so, but she raised it first. She is right that the robust and timely collection and sharing of data is vital for improvements in breast cancer services. If we do not measure it, we do not know; we cannot act. The National Cancer Regulation and Analysis Service, or NCRAS, collects data on all cancers diagnosed in England, with the data collection specified by the cancer outcomes and services dataset. That data collection of secondary breast cancers was mandated as part of the COSD for diagnoses from April 2013 onwards.
I remember, with my shadow Minister, taking a delegation to see Prime Minister David Cameron in No. 10 to talk about that exact issue just before Christmas; I remember our photo by the tree. It is good that that happened, but it is evident, comparing the collected data with sources in academic literature, that a large proportion of cases are still not being reported in the COSD. That is of great frustration to me. NCRAS continues to work with NHS trusts to improve the completion of the data, and we have redesigned aspects of the COSD to allow more relevant information on occurrence to be captured, but I do not for one minute shirk the fact that there is more to do in this area, and I assure the House and colleagues that I will constantly redouble my efforts in that regard.

Dr Whitford: I touched on the quality improvement project that we started in 2000 in Scotland, looking at many measures right along the pathway that the patient went through. In essence, it was assessing the whole team: how the team functioned, what the surgery was like, what the diagnosis was like and what the chemotherapy was like. The problem is that that sort of audit has not happened, other than for screening patients, in England for quite some time. While I welcome the collection of data on secondary cancer, we need units to have the ability to look at their performance on patients the first time around, to try to prevent that secondary cancer.

Steve Brine: The hon. Lady is right. That is why COSD stands for the cancer outcomes and services dataset. It is not specific to breast cancer, nor should it be, because there are sadly lots of different cancers, but she is right that it should be measuring, judging and analysing both the outcomes and the services that lead to that outcome. As ever, she is dead right.

The point was made about off-patent drugs being found to be effective in new uses. The Prime Minister set out, both in her party conference speech and when we launched the new NHS long-term plan, how a key ambition of that plan will be to speed up access to groundbreaking treatments, with a quicker translation of new breakthroughs into practice through investment in world-leading cancer research centres.

Although bisphosphonates—I always struggle to say that—are not licensed for the treatment or prevention of secondary breast cancer, clinicians can prescribe them offlicence or off-label, subject to local funding policies, if they consider them to be clinically appropriate for an individual. The hon. Lady was right to raise that point.

Dr Whitford: Will the Minister give way?

Steve Brine: Not at the moment. The hon. Lady and others also talked about the long-term funding of cancer alliances. NHS England and I are absolutely committed to the cancer alliances. We have backed them with significant funding and we will continue to support their development fully, ensuring that they have the funding that they need—in this cycle, at the very least—to transform cancer services in the long run.

I take a close and continued interest in the cancer alliances, as Members would expect. Just this week, I sat down with Cally Palmer, the NHS England’s national cancer director, to do what I call a deep dive, going through each cancer alliance in England. I want to know who runs them, where there are leadership challenges, where they struggle to meet the 62-day target and why, and I want to know their turnaround plans for that, including replacing people who are not performing. We do not expect or accept poor performance in a trust, and we do not expect or tolerate it in schools. Cancer alliances spend a lot of public money and they should not be treated any differently.

I want much greater transparency from the cancer alliances. I suspect that if I asked every Member here whether they knew the name of their local health trust chief executive, they would say that they did—and they probably have them on speed dial, as I do. If I asked those Members whether they knew the name and number of the person who leads their cancer alliance, I doubt that they would. I assure Members that that will change.

Dr Whitford: Bisphosphonates and other off-patent drugs are usually old drugs, which ought to be cheaper and therefore very cost-effective. The Minister and another Member mentioned that these drugs are not relicensed. A private Member’s Bill to set up a method for relicensing drugs for a new purpose was unfortunately talked out by the then Minister, the right hon. Member for North East Bedfordshire (Alistair Burt), in November 2016. We have agreement that these drugs will go into the “British National Formulary”, which will hopefully increase their use. However, I notice that the shocking increase in prices of off-patent drugs that led to the introduction of the Health Service Medical Supplies (Costs) Act 2017 has not changed. The regulations are not being used. NHS England is being charged ridiculous prices for old drugs and for specials that are made up for individuals. Why are we not using that legislation to drive down those prices, so that all women in England could access drugs that are not—or should not be—actually that expensive?

Steve Brine: There is so much more that I want to get on to, so I will not go into that in any great detail, but I will give the hon. Lady a note on that. Lord O’Shaughnessy, who is part of the Department’s drugs team and who speaks on health in the other place, is working on the implementation of that legislation. The hon. Lady has asked me about this before, and it frustrates me incredibly that that Act is not being implemented more quickly, but that should not be taken as any indication of a lack of desire on our part to do so. However, I take the hon. Lady’s point.

It is still right for those prescribing decisions to be made by clinicians. However, I want breakthrough drugs to make it on to the market more quickly, instead of staying in the cancer drugs fund. There are good examples of that related to breast cancer, and we want to see it happen much more quickly.

My dear hon. Friend the Member for Bexhill and Battle (Huw Merriman) spoke personally and passionately—as always—about these matters, and I thank him for that. He raised lots of issues, including the screening programme. Everyone says that the breast cancer screening programme is a critical tool in ensuring that we catch breast cancers as early as possible, when there is a much better chance of successful treatment. However, we know that there is much more to do to improve uptake. In her party conference speech, the Prime Minister set out that
we would transform our screening programmes, making them more accessible and easier to use and utilising the best research and technology. Further detail on that will be set out in the long-term plan later this year.

My hon. Friend also asked about technology in screening. I will come on to the screening scandal in a moment, but it is very much our aim that in the future patients will be able to make much greater use of technology to be informed of things, such as GP or screening appointments, rather than relying on Royal Mail. Our NHS app is being piloted and will be rolled out from December this year. That is just the start of the technology revolution that we want to see and that the Secretary of State has made one of his priorities. We expect the independent breast screening inquiry to make recommendations in that area.

Several Members asked about the inquiry into the breast screening problems that we had. We expect that to report shortly. I do not have an expected date, but several Members, including the hon. Member for Central Ayrshire, the shadow Minister, asked whether it is on schedule. I believe that it is, and I look forward to that report very much. With somebody as serious as the Macmillan chief executive leading that review, alongside others, I know that it will challenge us, as it is meant to; the former Secretary of State set it up to do so.

My hon. Friend the Member for Bexhill and Battle mentioned the importance of early diagnosis. I am proud of Public Health England’s Be Clear on Cancer campaign, which I am responsible for. PHE ran its 14th Be Clear on Cancer campaign through February and March of this year, focusing on breast cancer in women aged over 70—a subject that is very close to the hearts of members of the APPG. Research shows that older women are more likely to delay presenting to their GP with breast cancer symptoms. The campaign previously ran in 2014 and 2015, and an evaluation showed an increased awareness of the key messages that it promoted and, even more importantly, that more cancers were diagnosed during the campaign period. We are running the “Blood in Pee” campaign at the moment—I have all the glamorous things in my portfolio—and Be Clear on Cancer will go forward and from strength to strength.

Huw Merriman: I am incredibly impressed by what the Minister has said so far. Will he keep an open mind on the age limits for screening—particularly the entry age? I know that it has been reduced, but will he keep an open mind on reducing it further?

Steve Brine: I always keep an open mind. The truth is—the hon. Member for Central Ayrshire knows exactly what I will say—that although the screening review will no doubt make recommendations on that, there is a very heated and divided debate within the breast cancer community around screening, and not just about the age at which to begin it. We had the AgeX age extension trial, which broadened the range of ages at which we screen, but there is absolutely no consensus within the breast cancer community on the benefit of screening. That debate continues and rages strongly, and it is for policy makers to listen to all the different views, as the screening review will do.

Several Members, including the shadow Minister, rightly mentioned clinical nurse specialists and the cancer workforce. Last December, Health Education England published its first ever cancer workforce plan, which committed to the expansion of capacity and skills in fighting the big C.

Karen Lee: Will the Minister give way?

Steve Brine: Let me make this point. That plan includes an ambition to attract qualified people back to the NHS through domestic and international recruitment. HEE also plans to expand the number of clinical nurse specialists and to develop clear CNS competencies and routes into training. This will see every breast cancer patient having access to a CNS or other support worker by 2021.

We are committed to ensuring that all that happens. I saw a lot of news coverage last weekend on access to CNSs, and I completely accept that we have more to do. However, I have been very interested in listening. These debates are not only about me sitting here and waiting to read out my speech; they inform me, as much as anything. I was very interested in the discussion between the Labour and Scottish National party Front Benchers about what CNSs are called and the multidisciplinary team that they could be part of to offer support to women as they are going on this journey. I will definitely take that away.

Karen Lee: May I ask the Minister to respond directly to my comment that according to the figures out this morning—I know, because I was given them and asked to comment on them—the numbers of people training to be a nurse have dropped by just over 30% since the bursaries were withdrawn? The Government talk and talk about associate nurses and apprentice nurses, but there is not the take-up for those posts, and an apprentice nurse takes four years to train, so will he respond directly to my comments? Of course, the issue affects not just nurses but radiographers, as I said.

Steve Brine: The general point I would make is this. The hon. Lady said that people cannot live on good will; they have to have pay rises, and that is why I am very pleased that we have lifted the public sector cap pay. The significant pay rise that will be coming is welcome. Also, as well as expanding the number of nurse training places by 5,170, we are expanding the skills of specialist cancer nurses. There are 52,000 nurses training in the NHS, with more to come, thanks to our 25% increase in training places. The debate on bursaries is very live. That is discussed every single time we have Health questions—I dare say it will be again on Tuesday—but the Government have been very clear about our vision for the health education workforce and where we see nurse training places and the nurse apprenticeship scheme sitting in that. That is probably all I can add at the moment on that issue.

I want to touch on so many other different things. The hon. Member for Central Ayrshire, the shadow Minister and everyone else who spoke in the debate talked about prevention, and of course the title of the debate on the Order Paper is “Future of breast cancer”, so yes, we need to do a lot more to prevent people from developing cancer—not just breast cancer, but cancer—in
me very hard there when it happened. It resulted in thousands of women between the ages of 68 and 71 not being invited to their final screening. That is a stark reminder that however well we think we are doing, we have to do better. The former Secretary of State apologised unreservedly for it. He said that all we can do is put it right, and we are putting it right in terms of inviting people back for screening. We are determined; the independent review was set up to investigate and report on the circumstances of breast screening failure. That is expected to report shortly. It will challenge us and make very challenging recommendations. I look forward to discussing that with hon. Members.

The five-year survival rate for breast cancer is already 86%, as has been said. Some in the breast cancer community worry that the long-term plan and the Prime Minister’s new 75% early-stage detection ambition for cancer mean that we have no ambition left for breast cancer. Earlier this week the national cancer director and I discussed the long-term plan. I was absolutely clear with her, and she agrees, that our long-term ambitions cover all cancers, including breast cancer. The 75% five-year survival aim is ambitious—we would love many cancers to be even remotely there—but it is not the limit of our ambition.

As I said, I want a future in which there is no breast cancer. The NHS does well at diagnosing breast cancer, but it must do a lot better at preventing it. We must continue until the five-year survival figure is 100%, and I do not say that as a naive ambition. I want to make that point clear, because I know that some in the breast cancer community are concerned about that.

I pay tribute to the selfless work done by the people who will deliver the vision in the cancer strategy and the wider long-term plan. Obviously, doctors and nurses are at the sharp end, and I visit them when I go out and about. They, not Ministers, are the people behind the highest ever survival rates. I also want to add my thanks to the charities, which I have enjoyed working with. Breakthrough Breast Cancer joined with the Breast Cancer Campaign to become Breast Cancer Now. I enjoy working with Dellyth, Baroness Morgan, of Breast Cancer Now and with Breast Cancer Care and Breast Cancer Haven. I have a lot of time for Breast Cancer Haven, which creates havens to help women to feel human and normal again after treatment. It does a lot of good work.

NHS England and I, with the support of what I always call Team Cancer, are utterly committed to making the ambitions that we set out in our long-term plan and our new cancer strategy a reality. That will ensure that we take a huge leap forward, over the next 10 years, to a future in which cancer has no future.

3.8 pm

**Laura Smith:** I thank everyone who has attended the debate—especially because I am not sure whether the heating bill has been paid in here. It is absolutely freezing, so well done to all those in the Public Gallery.

Breast cancer is the most common cancer in the UK. Every 45 minutes, another life is lost to the disease; it claims almost 1,000 lives every month in the UK. I pay special tribute to the charities that help to raise awareness, support those affected in all our communities and, of course, fund research into this devastating disease. Thanks
to that research, more people are surviving breast cancer than ever before. I hope that I live to see the day when everyone who develops breast cancer lives.

I want to thank the Minister, the shadow Minister and the hon. Member for Central Ayrshire (Dr Whitford), who represents the Scottish National party. Her expertise in this area is very welcome, and I have learned a lot. I thank the hon. Members for Strangford (Jim Shannon) and for Bexhill and Battle (Huw Merriman) for their contributions. Special thanks go to my hon. Friend the Member for Lincoln (Karen Lee), who spoke so passionately about her own experience. Her daughter would be very proud of her work and all that she does, and her friends and family are proud of her too.

As a 33-year-old mother of two young children, I would welcome earlier screening with open arms, but as the hon. Member for Central Ayrshire pointed out, it is also about education in how to check for lumps—what they look like and feel like. I check my breasts, but I am not convinced that I am doing it right, so it would be good to be shown how to do that. I will call on her from now on—she will not be able to get rid of me.

Praise must go to the all-party parliamentary group on breast cancer for its report on the geographical inequalities. I encourage all hon. Members who are yet to read the report to do so. I hope to see everyone join in for Wear it Pink tomorrow. My trophy for winning the title of best-dressed MP for Wear it Pink is in pride of place between my son’s football trophies, but my two-year-old daughter has claimed it as her own prize—it is her “booby trophy”. Thank you for chairing the debate, Mr McCabe and thanks again to everyone who has attended.

Question put and agreed to.

Resolved,

That this House has considered the future of breast cancer.

3.11 pm

Sitting adjourned.
Written Statements

Tuesday 9 October 2018

BUSINESS, ENERGY AND INDUSTRIAL STRATEGY

Business Update

The Secretary of State for Business, Energy and Industrial Strategy (Greg Clark): Last week I published a Call for Evidence seeking views on the extent and impact of late payment and measures to go further in tackling the issue. This follows the commitment made by the Chancellor of the Exchequer in his 2018 spring statement that the Department for Business, Energy and Industrial Strategy would lead on a call for evidence to ‘eliminate the continuing scourge of late payments’.

Since 2012, the overall level of late payment debt owed to SMEs has fallen substantially, to £14.2 billion last year, down from £30.3 billion five years ago according to BACS, the payment service provider. While the halving of late payment debt is welcome, I am determined to see this reduce still further.

Alongside this publication, I announced that the Government would take immediate action to tackle late payment, by introducing the following measures:

A new, tough and transparent compliance regime to underpin the prompt payment Code. The Small Business Commissioner will join the code’s compliance board to provide independence from industry and the board will report on all cases of signatories being removed from the Code. Further reform to the Code will be considered through the call for evidence, including whether the Small Business Commissioner should have a greater role in its Administration.

The Call for Evidence will also consider the best way to ensure all companies have responsible payment practices in their supply chains, including whether all company boards should give one of their non-executive directors responsibilities for prompt payment.

The Call for Evidence will be open until 29 November and I encourage businesses of all sizes to respond; I want to understand the impacts, experiences and reasoning’s for particular payment practices and views on what more can be done to enhance the payments process.

I will be depositing copies of the Call for Evidence document in the Libraries of both Houses.

[HCWS971]

Labour Market Update

The Secretary of State for Business, Energy and Industrial Strategy (Greg Clark): I am writing to inform the House that over conference recess I announced the Government’s intention to: legislate to ban employers from retaining tips earned by their staff; consider creating a duty for employers to advertise all jobs as flexible unless there is a good business reason not to; and to consult on whether large employers (those with 250 or more employees) should be required to publish their parental leave and pay policies.

Tipping

The Government will introduce legislation to ban employers from making deductions from tips, ensuring tips go to the workers providing the service. While most employers act in good faith, in some sectors evidence points towards poor tipping practices, including excessive deductions being made from tips left in good faith by customers.

This legislation will give consumers reassurance that the tips they leave are going to the staff, as they intended. It follows a consultation which found a majority of respondents in favour of preventing any employer deductions from discretionary payments, except those required under tax law.

The Government will announce further details in due course, including measures to ensure employers are able to continue to distribute tips via independent and staff-run “tronic” systems.

Flexible working

The ability to work flexibly enables people—both men and women—to balance their work and home lives more effectively. Moreover, flexible working gives employers access to a wider talent pool and enables better matching of applicants and jobs. Employee engagement, performance and productivity are also improved.

However, flexible working is still relatively uncommon, which sometimes holds people back from requesting it. The Government would like it to be clearer from the outset whether flexible working is an option. Research indicates only 9.8% of quality job vacancies are advertised as open some kind of flexible working, yet many more are likely to be.

The Government want employers to consider whether a job can be done flexibly, and to make that clear when advertising. There are many good reasons why a job might not be suitable for flexible working, but where it is, signalling this at the outset will encourage interest from a wider range of candidates and enable both sides to take full advantage of the flexibility.

Transparency on parental leave and pay

Statutory entitlements to parental leave and pay enable mothers who want to return to work earlier to do so and enable more fathers and partners to be their child’s main carer where this is best for the family. Statutory entitlements are also important in closing the gender pay gap, by providing parents with more opportunities to remain in work and to progress their careers.

Many employers offer enhancements to the statutory entitlements, but surprisingly few publicise these policies. This means that job applicants have to ask specifically about these policies—which some may be reluctant to do.

Mandatory gender pay gap reporting, introduced in April 2017, already provides a clear incentive to large employers to review their policies and recruitment procedures and to publicise those that enable them to recruit and retain female talent. The Government want to accelerate that improvement by encouraging large employers to publish their parental leave and pay policies, and will consult on a proposal to require large employers to publish their parental leave and pay policies.

[HCWS977]
GOV.UK Verify Programme

The Parliamentary Secretary, Cabinet Office (Oliver Dowden): I want to update the House on the GOV.UK Verify programme, on the creation of a digital identity market, and the provision of a digital identity service to Government.

Since its inception, GOV.UK Verify has sought to create an effective standards based digital identity market in the UK. International examples point to the challenges in successfully creating a secure digital identity framework for the public and private sector. I am proud that the UK is regarded as a global leader in this space, and that the innovative assets and standards created by the GOV.UK Verify programme have been utilised by numerous international Governments.

GOV.UK Verify is now sufficiently mature to move to the next phase of its development. The private sector will take responsibility for broadening the usage and application of digital identity in the UK.

I can confirm that contracts have been signed with a number of private sector identity providers, for an 18 month period, and with capped expenditure. These commercial arrangements formalise the transition to a private sector led model.

The Government have an immediate and growing need for digital identity. As such, I am pleased to confirm that the GOV.UK Verify programme will continue providing a digital identity service to the public sector.

Poorly secured services are vulnerable to attack from cyber crime and other hostile activity. GOV.UK Verify enables citizens to securely prove that they are who they say they are to a high degree of confidence when transacting with Government online. It is a major enabler and a critical dependency for Government’s digital transformation.

The Government will continue to provide state backed assurance and standards to ensure there is trust and confidence in the emergent digital identity market. The Government expect that commercial organisations will create and reuse digital identities, and accelerate the creation of an interoperable digital identity market. This is therefore the last investment that the Government will provide to directly support the GOV.UK Verify programme. It will be the responsibility of the private sector to invest to ensure the delivery of this product beyond the above period.

The approach announced today ensures that GOV.UK Verify will continue to protect public sector digital services from cyber threats, including identity fraud, and other malicious activity. In addition, the contracts enable the private sector to develop affordable identity assurance services that will meet future private and public sector needs.

I am pleased that the Government can continue to support the creation of a digital identity market, and the work of the GOV.UK Verify programme.

Airborne Warning and Control System

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Defence (Stuart Andrew): I am pleased to inform the House today that the Ministry of Defence (MOD) has begun discussions with Boeing about the potential for the E-7 Advanced Early Warning and Control “Wedgetail” aircraft to replace the current Sentry fleet.

Since the 2015 strategic defence and security review, the MOD has undertaken significant work to understand the best way to invest in and improve the RAF’s airborne warning and control capability. As part of that work, we have considered the defence requirement and rapidly evolving threat environment, conducted market analysis, and held discussions with our close allies, so we could fully understand the options available to us.

It has become increasingly apparent that an upgrade to the existing UK E-3 Sentry aircraft will not offer best value in meeting the UK’s capability requirement. As such, the E-7 Wedgetail, which has been proven on operations and is already in use by the Royal Australian Air Force, is likely to be the best option to provide “eyes in the sky” surveillance for UK forces.

The MOD is now taking forward single source discussions with Boeing. This does not, however, represent a final decision; any purchase will be subject to the MOD’S usual acquisition approval processes.

As discussions are still at a very early stage, it would not be appropriate to provide detailed information on the industrial and economic impact that a final procurement decision could have. The MOD understands, however, that Boeing is in discussions with a number of UK suppliers and is expecting to make significant use of the UK supply chain to undertake the conversion and through-life support of these UK aircraft.

The decision to begin single source engagement with Boeing has only been taken after a full consideration of potential options in the market, balanced with a pressing capability need. While the UK remains committed to the principle of open competition to fulfil defence requirements, in this instance, the potential procurement of E-7 represents the lowest risk and is likely to offer best value for money for the UK. It will also provide our armed forces with a highly-effective, world-leading capability.

Type 26 Frigates Base-Porting

The Secretary of State for Defence (Gavin Williamson): Today I am confirming our plans to base-port the Royal Navy’s Type 26 Frigates at HM Naval Base Devonport in Plymouth. This decision is judged to be in the best interests of the Service and to provide greater stability for Service Personnel and their families.

Navy Command and the Defence Equipment and Support organisation will continue to work closely with our industrial partners to ensure that the transition from the current anti-submarine Warfare Type 23 Frigates to the new class is effectively managed.
There has been much interest in this subject from hon. Members representing both Plymouth and Portsmouth who have spoken passionately in support of their respective bases becoming the home of the Type 26 Frigates. This decision should in no way be seen as a reduced commitment to Portsmouth; both naval bases will continue to support the Royal Navy, allowing the Service to continue to meet the tasks we ask in countering the threats we face and protecting the nation’s security.

[HCWS975]

EXITING THE EUROPEAN UNION

EU Exit

The Secretary of State for Exiting the European Union (Dominic Raab): As announced by the Prime Minister and Secretary of State for Exiting the European Union on 18 July 2018, the Government are publishing a series of technical notices during August and September. On Thursday 23 August, we published 25 of these notices, and on Thursday 13 September, we published a further 28. During parliamentary recess on Monday 24 September, we published a further 24 technical notices. These notices are designed to inform people, businesses and stakeholders about steps they may need to take in the event of a no-deal scenario.

Notices were published on the following areas:
- Registration of veterinary medicines
- Regulation of veterinary medicines
- Accessing animal medicine IT systems
- Exporting animals and animal products
- Importing animals and animal products
- Flights to and from the UK
- Aviation safety
- Aviation security
- Trade marks and designs
- Patents
- Copyright
- Exhaustion of intellectual property rights
- European Territorial Cooperation funding
- Generating low-carbon electricity
- Regulating chemicals (REACH)
- Manufacturing and marketing fertilisers
- Producing and labelling food
- Importing and exporting plants
- Taking your pet abroad
- Operating bus or coach services abroad
- Commercial road haulage in the EU
- Buying and selling timber
- Vehicle insurance
- Geographical Indicators

Notices are being published on gov.uk. These can be found at: https://www.gov.uk/government/collections/how-to-prepare-if-the-uk-leaves-the-eu-with-no-deal.

Copies of notices have also been placed in the Libraries of both Houses to ensure all Members have access, and we will continue to ensure that technical notices are made available to Members.

[HCWS970]

General Affairs Council, 18 September 2018

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Exiting the European Union (Mr Robin Walker): Lord Callanan, Minister of State for Exiting the European Union, has made the following statement:

I represented the UK at the General Affairs Council (GAC) meeting on 18 September in Brussels. A provisional report of the meeting and the conclusions adopted can be found on the Council of the European Union’s website at:


Multianual financial framework (MFF) 2021-27

The presidency provided Ministers with an update on the Commission’s proposal on the MFF. Ministers discussed the extent to which EU policy priorities and the allocation of funds to different policy areas were reflected in the MFF proposal. The Commission reiterated its intention to reach consensus on the proposals ahead of the 2019 European Parliament elections. I did not intervene in the discussion on the basis that, while the UK had an interest in participation in some programmes, it was for other member states to discuss and agree the overall priorities and funds allocations for the next MFF.

Presentation of the priorities of the Austrian presidency

The presidency indicated that it intended to prioritise managing migration, removing overregulation in the digital single market and creating stability in the western Balkans.

Legislative programming

The Council discussed the letter of intent issued by the Commission on 12 September which set out its legislative priorities for 2019. The Commission will consider member states’ views on the proposals as it finalises its work programme. The programme is expected to be published in October and will be discussed by Ministers at the General Affairs Council meeting on 12 November. The presidency also highlighted the need to complete important legislative files before the end of the current Commission President’s term in 2019. Ministers continued their discussion on legislative programming over a working lunch where I intervened to reiterate the UK’s support for policy areas, such as the digital single market, trade and external security, in which the UK is looking to build a new relationship with the EU following our exit.

Preparation of the October European Council on 18 October 2018

Ministers considered the annotated draft agenda for the October European Council. Leaders are expected to discuss migration and internal security. There were no interventions from member states on this agenda item.

Rule of law in Poland/article 7(1) TEU reasoned proposal

The Council held a second hearing under article 7(1) TEU on the rule of law in Poland. The Commission reiterated its concerns in this matter and presented the reasons behind its decision in July to start infringement proceedings against Poland in response to the lowering of the retirement age of Supreme Court judges from 70 to 65. In reply, Poland delivered a presentation on the evolution of its judicial reforms and argued its right to make changes which were consistent with the Polish constitution. The UK was among 16 member states which did not intervene in the hearing. The presidency indicated that Ministers would return to this matter at future Council meetings.

[HCWS973]
HEALTH AND SOCIAL CARE

Clinical Waste Update

The Minister for Health (Stephen Barclay): This statement is to update the House on an issue concerning clinical waste collection and disposal for hospitals and other public services.

On 31 July, the Environment Agency notified central Government of an issue concerning clinical waste collection and disposal for hospitals and other public services provided by the company, Healthcare Environmental Services (HES). In this instance, the primary concern was that too much waste was being held in a number of waste storage and treatment sites by a contractor, Healthcare Environmental Services (HES). While the waste was stored securely, it was not being processed and disposed of within the correct regulatory timescales. At no point has there been an impact on public health or any delay to the ability of the NHS to carry out operations.

The Department of Health and Social Care, DEFRA, the Cabinet Office, NHS England, NHS Improvement and the Environment Agency have worked together to resolve these issues. From the outset, the Government’s priority has been to ensure measures were put in place so that trusts could continue operating as normal should there be any disruption to waste collection and disposal. This objective has been achieved. The Department of Health and Social Care has worked with the NHS to help trusts put these contingency plans in place. A major part of these contingency plans concerned contractual discussions with HES and other providers which were commercially sensitive.

Following the Environment Agency’s issuing of a partial closure to HES’s Normanton site, on 3 October the regulator, NHS Improvement, issued a letter to HES to advise them that they had concerns in respect of services provided to trusts. To give HES an opportunity to set out how it was complying with its legal and contractual obligations, NHSI gave HES 48 hours to provide evidence that they were operating within legal and contractual parameters and set out a number of threshold levels. NHSI concluded that HES failed to demonstrate that they were operating within their contractual limits. Consequently, 15 NHS trusts served termination notices to HES formally to terminate their contracts at 4 pm on Sunday 7 October. In parallel, the Department of Health and Social Care, the Cabinet Office, NHS Improvement and the affected trusts have negotiated a new contract with Mitie to step in and replace this service. This contract was enacted, following the termination of the contract with HES, and Mitie have been fully operational across all affected trust sites from Monday morning.

Throughout, the Government’s priority have been to ensure measures were put in in place so that NHS trusts can continue operating as normal. No gap in service provision has been reported and we are working to ensure that this remains the case.

The Environment Agency are taking enforcement action against HES to clear the excess waste from their sites and bring the company back into compliance with their permits. As part of this enforcement activity, the Environment Agency have partially suspended the company’s permit at their Normanton site. This will prevent HES from accepting any more incinerator-only waste, as the company focuses on clearing the backlog of waste on-site. The Environment Agency are also progressing with enforcement action at the other non-compliant sites. This includes following up the first enforcement notice for the HES Newcastle site. If the site does not become compliant, the likely next stage is a partial suspension to prevent the acceptance of incinerator-only waste at Newcastle. It is the company’s responsibility to clear its sites and operate legally.

I am updating the House on this situation now, given that new contracts have been signed following the conclusion of the commercially sensitive process. I can confirm that NHS services continue to operate as normal. We are ensuring that there are contingency plans in place in case of any disruption, and that there is absolutely no risk to the health of patients or the wider public. The Government are working with the Environment Agency and NHS to ensure lessons are learnt, and we are reviewing how contracts will be awarded in the future.

HOUSING, COMMUNITIES AND LOCAL GOVERNMENT

Building Safety Update

The Secretary of State for Housing, Communities and Local Government (James Brokenshire): My Department published a consultation earlier this year on a proposal to introduce a ban on the use of combustible materials in the external walls of high-rise residential buildings.

I would like to update the House to confirm that the Government will take forward this ban for all new buildings over 18 metres that contain flats, as well as new hospitals, residential care premises, residential schools and student accommodation above 18 metres.

This ban will be delivered through changes to building regulations and will limit materials available to products achieving a European classification of Class A1 or A2. The Government will publish the consultation outcome and ensure the regulations are brought forward as soon as possible later this autumn.

[HCWS972]

[HCWS976]
Written Statements

Wednesday 10 October 2018

BUSINESS, ENERGY AND INDUSTRIAL STRATEGY

Competitiveness Council

The Minister for Universities, Science, Research and Innovation (Mr Sam Gyimah):

**DAY ONE**

The first day of the Competitiveness Council (Internal Market and Industry) took place on 27 September 2018.

The UK was represented by Katrina Williams, Deputy Permanent Representative to the EU. The legislative and non-legislative “A” items were adopted; the UK abstained on a decision not to oppose the adoption of amendments to the regulation on vehicle type approvals, and on the adoption of European seabass quotas.

Regional policy and competitiveness

The routine “competitiveness check-up” on day one focused on the role that greater convergence in productivity within member states has to play in boosting the EU’s competitiveness. The UK joined others in support of so-called “smart specialisation” strategies and their emphasis on innovation and comparative advantage. Some member states welcomed the Commission’s intention to incorporate a regional element into the European semester. Over lunch, Ministers also discussed the next multi-annual financial framework in the context of competitiveness.

Artificial intelligence

The presidency identified priority areas for the EU on artificial intelligence (AI) relating to the uptake of technology, ethics and liability, and digital skills. The Commission confirmed its intention to publish an action plan by the end of 2018 and recalled increased investment in AI proposed as part of the Horizon Europe and Digital Europe programmes.

An external speaker, Mr Michael Hirschbrich, urged member states to cultivate a new, positive “data culture” in Europe as a prerequisite for the EU to profit from the revolution in AI and machine learning. Germany felt this would be a challenge for the EU and would require public trust. Several delegations cautioned against over-regulating in this area and others argued that effective communication and realising the potential of new technologies in the delivery of public services would help to raise public trust and awareness.

The UK outlined its investment plans for AI, its inclusive approach to digital skills, work to establish an independent centre for data ethics and innovation, and noted the importance of regulatory co-operation in this area.

Single market

Under any other business, the Commission called for the full implementation of the geoblocking regulation and recalled the aims of a recent communication on the retail sector.

The Czech Republic and Latvia summarised the conclusions of events held this year to mark 25 years of the single market. Member states urged the Commission to produce a comprehensive and evidence-based assessment of the remaining barriers to trade, particularly in the area of services.

**DAY TWO**

Day two of the Competitiveness Council (Internal Market, Industry, Research and Space) took place on 28 September in Brussels. I represented the UK during the morning and lunch sessions of the Council. Katrina Williams, Deputy Permanent Representative of the UK’s Permanent Representation in Brussels took the UK’s seat during the afternoon session.

Progress report and policy debate on the Horizon Europe Package: Framework Programme for Research and Innovation 2021-2027

The Council started with a policy debate on the Horizon Europe Package: Framework Programme for Research and Innovation 2021-2027. The UK called for excellence to remain the key criterion for awarding Horizon Europe funding. The UK also suggested that space should become a separate cluster outside of “digital and industry”, and that the secure society cluster should be divided into two distinct clusters; one for “security”, elements and one for “social sciences and humanities” elements. The UK also supported the presidency’s approach to the debate surrounding the legal base of the Horizon Europe Specific Programme, agreeing that the aim should be to reach a timely conclusion on the Horizon package.

Lunch debate on the Horizon Europe package—exchange of views with EP rapporteurs

During the lunch debate the Council had an exchange of views with EP rapporteurs Dan Nica and Christian Ehler. The UK made an intervention specifying UK’s priority areas for amendments and encouraging debate amongst MEPs at the first exchange of views on October 8.

Strategic planning process in relation to the Horizon Europe Framework Programme for Research and Innovation 2021-2027

The Council concluded with a policy debate on the strategic planning process in relation to the Horizon Europe Framework Programme for Research and Innovation 2021-2027. The UK made an intervention seeking to help find consensus in Council on the process and status of the plan, agreeing that broad areas for missions and partnerships should be set out in the specific programme and suggesting that the process for selecting specific missions and partnerships should also be included. The UK agreed that more detailed strategic content should be determined at a later date.

[HCWS980]

Energy Policy

The Secretary of State for Business, Energy and Industrial Strategy (Greg Clark): The Government remain committed to putting in place all the necessary measures to ensure that the UK can operate as an independent and responsible nuclear state upon the UK’s withdrawal from Euratom.

We remain on track to have all the international agreements that the UK requires to ensure uninterrupted co-operation and trade in the civil nuclear sector ready for the end of March 2019. Significant progress in this
area is marked by the signing of a new bilateral nuclear co-operation agreement (NCA) with Australia on 21 August. This is the second NCA to be signed with a priority third country in preparation for the UK’s withdrawal from Euratom, following the new bilateral agreement with the United States signed on 4 May.

The Government have completed their consultation on the draft nuclear safeguards regulations which set out the detail of a new domestic civil nuclear safeguards regime. We are analysing responses to the consultation and will publish a formal response to the consultation in the autumn. We expect to lay draft regulations before Parliament by the end of this year. The regulations, to be made under powers in the Energy Act 2013 and Nuclear Safeguards Act 2018, will enable a domestic nuclear safeguards regime to be established before the end of March 2019.

In July, we set out details of our ambition to seek a close association with Euratom—specifically, through the negotiation of a nuclear co-operation agreement (NCA) between Euratom and the UK that is more comprehensive and broader than any existing agreement between Euratom and a third country.

Simultaneously, we are ensuring that the necessary legislation is ready, and the civil nuclear industry is prepared for all potential scenarios, including the unlikely event that the UK leaves the EU and Euratom at the end of March 2019 without an agreement (a no-deal scenario). We have laid a number of statutory instruments before Parliament on Euratom-related issues and have published a technical notice on civil nuclear regulation to support businesses and other interested parties in making informed plans and preparations for a no-deal scenario.

Today I will be depositing a report in the Libraries of both Houses that sets out further details on the overall progress on the Government’s implementation of their Euratom exit strategy, including EU negotiations, domestic operational readiness, legislation and international agreements. This report is being laid in accordance with section 3(4) of the Nuclear Safeguards Act 2018 and follows two voluntary quarterly updates to Parliament.

The initial commitment to quarterly reporting on a voluntary basis was set out in my written ministerial statement of 11 January 2018, Official Report, column 9WS. Section 3(4) of the Nuclear Safeguards Act 2018 provides for four statutory quarterly reporting periods in respect of which the Secretary of State must lay a report before Parliament. This is the first such report and covers the three-month reporting period from 26 June until 26 September. I plan to lay the next report on Euratom exit progress in January 2019.

[HCWS983]

DEFENCE

Future Accommodation Model

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Defence (Mr Tobias Ellwood): It was previously announced that the future accommodation model (FAM) was being developed with the intention of changing the way in which we provide accommodation to service personnel to ensure that a career in the armed forces can be balanced better with family life. We are committed to making the changes necessary to enable our armed forces to work flexibly, reflecting the realities of modern life and to make a new accommodation offer to help more service personnel live in private accommodation and meet their aspirations for home ownership.

This commitment is being delivered through the FAM which aims to design and deliver a new accommodation model that improves and modernises aspects of the accommodation offer for service personnel and better meets the enduring operational and financial needs of the Department.

We had hoped to run a pilot towards the end of this year and remain committed to this policy principle, but the pilot scheme will now take place in 2019. This will allow the Ministry of Defence additional time to fully evaluate the scope of the pilot and better understand its impact on service personnel, with a view to delivering the most effective model. The pilot, in 2019, will also allow us to continue to work closely with broader departmental and cross-Whitehall initiatives to support service personnel accommodation.

We value the input we have had from service personnel, frontline commands and the families federations, and look forward to continuing to work with them on the implementation of FAM in the future. I will update the House in due course.

[HCWS982]

DIGITAL, CULTURE, MEDIA AND SPORT

British Board of Film Classification: Contingent Liability

The Minister for Digital and the Creative Industries (Margot James): I am today laying a departmental minute to advise that the Department for Digital, Culture, Media and Sport (DCMS) has received approval from Her Majesty’s Treasury (HMT) to recognise a new contingent liability which will come into effect when age verification powers under part 3 of the Digital Economy Act 2017 enter force.

The contingent liability will provide indemnity to the British Board of Film Classification (BBFC) against legal proceedings brought against the BBFC in its role as the age verification regulator for online pornography.

As Members know, the Digital Economy Act introduces the requirement for commercial providers of online pornography to have robust age verification controls to protect children and young people under 18 from exposure to online pornography. As the designated age verification regulator, the BBFC will have extensive powers to take enforcement action against non-compliant sites. The BBFC can issue civil proceedings, give notice to payment-service providers or ancillary service providers, or direct internet service providers to block access to websites where a provider of online pornography remains non-compliant.

The BBFC expects a high level of voluntary compliance by providers of online pornography. To encourage compliance, the BBFC has engaged with industry and charities and undertaken a public consultation on its regulatory approach. Furthermore, the BBFC will ensure
that it takes a proportionate approach to enforcement and will maintain arrangements for an appeals process to be overseen by an independent appeals body. This will help reduce the risk of potential legal action against the BBFC.

However, despite the effective work with industry, charities and the public to promote and encourage compliance, this is a new law and there nevertheless remains a risk that the BBFC will be exposed to legal challenge on the basis of decisions taken as the age verification regulator or on grounds of principle from those opposed to the policy.

As this is a new policy, it is not possible to quantify accurately the value of such risks. The Government estimate a realistic risk range to be between £1 million and £10 million in the first year, based on likely number and scale of legal challenges. The BBFC investigated options to procure commercial insurance but failed to do so given difficulties in accurately determining the size of potential risks. The Government therefore will ensure that the BBFC is protected against any legal action brought against the BBFC as a result of carrying out duties as the age verification regulator.

The contingent liability is required to be in place for the duration of the period the BBFC remains the age verification regulator. However, we expect the likelihood of the contingent liability being called upon to diminish over time as the regime settles in and relevant industries become accustomed to it. If the liability is called upon, provision for any payment will be sought through the normal Supply procedure.

It is usual to allow a period of 14 sitting days prior to accepting a contingent liability, to provide Members of Parliament an opportunity to raise any objections.

[HCWS986]

EDUCATION

Government Asset Sale

The Minister for Universities, Science, Research and Innovation (Mr Sam Gyimah): Today, I can confirm that the Government are announcing their intention to proceed with the second sale from the "plan 1" (i.e. pre-2012) English student loan book. The sale covers loans issued by English local authorities only under the previous (pre-2012) system, specifically those which entered repayment between 2007 and 2009, with a total face value of around £3.9 billion. This is the second sale of the Income Contingent Repayment (ICR) loan book, and it is proceeding on the basis that there is a reasonable prospect of achieving value for money. It will only complete subject to market conditions and a final value being achieved.

As the Government have previously made clear, the position of all graduates, including those whose loans are part of a sale, will not change as a result of the sale. A sale will not alter the mechanisms and terms of repayment and sold loans will continue to be serviced by Her Majesty's Revenue and Customs (HMRC) and the Student Loans Company (SLC) on the same basis as equivalent unsold loans. These protections mean that purchasers will have no right to change any of the current loan arrangements or to directly contact borrowers. Government have no plans to change, or to consider changing, the terms of pre-2012 loans.

The sale terms are expected to include a number of warranties and indemnities for sale arrangers and investors, which give rise to contingent liabilities for Government. In this case, although there is specific statutory authority for the liability under the Sale of Student Loans Act 2008, I believe it is appropriate to notify Parliament before incurring these liabilities. As a matter of record I have placed a departmental minute in the Libraries of both Houses describing the contingent liabilities that the Department for Education will hold on behalf of Government as a result of this second sale of the pre-2012 English student loan book. The maximum contingent liability against the Department for Education is unquantifiable and is expected to be in place for as long as there are outstanding securities.

The House will also be informed if and when a sale is completed.

[HCWS979]

HOME DEPARTMENT

Deportation with Assurances Review

The Secretary of State for the Home Department (Sajid Javid): In November 2013, the then Home Secretary asked David Anderson QC to conduct a review of the framework of the UK's Deportation with Assurances (DWA) policy, and to make recommendations on how the policy might be strengthened or improved, with particular emphasis on its legal aspects. My predecessor published Mr Anderson's report and made copies available in the vote office on 20 July 2017.

On announcing Mr Anderson’s report to this House, the then Home Secretary stated that the Government would respond through a Command Paper. I am pleased to be publishing this Command Paper today (Cm 9712). Copies will be available in the Vote Office.

[HCWS984]

Report of the Independent Reviewer of Terrorism Legislation


In accordance with section 36(5) of the Terrorism Act 2006, I am today laying this report before the House, and copies will be available in the Vote Office. It will also be published at: www.gov.uk.

I am grateful to Mr Hill for his report. I will carefully consider its contents and the recommendations he makes, and will respond formally in due course.

[HCWS985]
Ebola Outbreak in the DRC

The current outbreak of Ebola was declared in North Kivu, Democratic Republic of the Congo (DRC), on 1 August. Following my written ministerial statement of 13 September, Official Report, column 38WS, I am updating the House on how the UK Government are continuing to support the response in DRC, and preparedness in neighbouring countries.

**DRC outbreak**

Since my last update, the number of confirmed Ebola cases in this outbreak has continued to rise, and stood at 146 on 7 October. The geographic coverage has also widened, with confirmed cases near the Ugandan border on Lake Albert. On 29 September, the World Health Organisation (WHO) raised the risk of national and regional spread of the outbreak from “high” to “very high”. The DRC Government, which are leading the response with the support of WHO, are preparing an extended response plan which will extend key activities for several months longer. As well as the response in the affected area, activities are also planned to support Ebola preparedness in other provinces across DRC.

One of the key challenges is insecurity. Attacks by armed groups in the affected area have disrupted the response and remain a major risk. This instability, as well as the area’s significant commercial links with neighbouring countries, means that there is a large amount of cross-border movement by both commercial travellers and refugees. WHO has developed a regional plan to help neighbouring countries at risk from Ebola to prepare for any potential cases.

**UK response**

My Department is ready to respond quickly and effectively to all kinds of sudden onset emergencies. That is why we maintain a central crisis reserve. In 2018-19, I have approved up to £20 million from this reserve to contribute to Ebola responses in the affected region. All donors have been asked not to announce figures for specific activities, to avoid putting implementing partners at risk from criminal elements. I hope the House will respect the need for discretion about this.

Through the crisis reserve, the UK Government provided early funding to the existing outbreak response, and to the WHO regional preparedness plan for at-risk countries bordering DRC. We will also be funding key UN posts in these countries to ensure they are prepared to deal with cases of Ebola.

In view of recent developments, we have increased our support, through WHO, for the response and preparedness activities in DRC and neighbouring countries. This funding will support a range of activities including surveillance, vaccinations, infection prevention and control, community engagement and safe and dignified burials.

To help people affected by, or at risk from, Ebola is the right thing to do. It is also in our national interest to find ways of building resilience to such deadly diseases. Therefore I stand ready to approve additional support, if required.

The UK Government are also drawing on all available scientific data about the latest outbreak. At present, it is not possible to make long-term projections about the course of the epidemic with any certainty but it is reasonable to assume that the outbreak will continue into 2019. We will continue to liaise closely with WHO and others to ensure that the available scientific evidence is reflected in scenario planning.

The current response is deploying an experimental vaccine to contacts of infected people and frontline health workers. This vaccine was developed with support from UK Aid following the west Africa Ebola epidemic. In DRC, over 14,000 people—over 5,000 of whom are health workers—have been vaccinated during this outbreak so far. The UK is also supporting training in preparation for clinical trials of several of the new therapeutic drugs for Ebola.

Public Health England assesses the risk of this outbreak to the UK as negligible to very low. They will continue to monitor and assess the outbreak closely. The UK Government remain at full readiness to respond should that risk change.

[HCWS981]
Parliament elections. The UK’s exit from the EU will mean that we will not be taking part in future European parliamentary elections.

There will be a lunchtime discussion covering EU financing for justice. The UK does not participate in the current justice programme (2014-20) and will be a third country when the next justice programme and the other programmes likely to be discussed enter into force. The UK will consider its participation as a third country in due course.

The Commission will provide an update on the planned preparatory steps on the legal and organisational measures to be taken to make the European Public Prosecutor’s Office (EPPO) operational. The UK does not participate in the EPPO.

Ministers will exchange views on ways to reinforce judicial co-operation in criminal justice through mutual recognition tools, including the European arrest warrant and European investigation order. The UK values our co-operation under these tools and will highlight our commitment to the principle of mutual recognition and the importance of close operational working between member states to ensure that they function efficiently.

The Home Secretary will attend the JHA Council for Interior Day on 12 October.

There will be a policy debate on the proposed regulation to amend the European border and coast guard regulation which aims to reinforce the EU’s integrated border management strategy and further protect the external borders by providing the European Border and Coast Guard Agency with a standing corps of 10,000 staff with executive powers, their own equipment and the ability to act in third countries. This is a Schengen building measure which the UK does not participate in.

The Council will discuss the proposed recast of the EU returns directive. The UK chose not to participate in the current version of this directive. The UK will need to decide whether to participate in this recast.

The Council will discuss developments under the comprehensive approach on migration. The presidency will focus on the common European asylum system, co-operation with north African countries on a range of migration issues including search and rescue disembarkations, and work to tackle organised immigration crime. The UK supports work to strengthen the EU’s external borders and to intensify relationships with key third countries in order to break smuggling networks and ensure that protection is given to those most in need.

The Council will discuss proposed EU JHA funding programmes for the next (2021-27) multiannual financial framework. These programmes will commence after the UK’s exit from the EU and the end of the envisaged implementation period. The UK will not be participating in any future programmes as a member state. The UK will consider options to participate as a third country on a case-by-case basis where there is benefit to the UK.

There will be further debate on the reform of the common European asylum system, including the issues of solidarity, responsibility and relocation in the context of the Dublin IV proposal, in which the UK is not participating.
Written Statements

**Thursday 11 October 2018**

**CABINET OFFICE**

**Race Disparity Audit**

The Chancellor of the Duchy of Lancaster and Minister for the Cabinet Office (Mr David Lidington): At the publication of the race disparity audit a year ago, the Government committed to “explain or change” the issues highlighted on the audit’s website Ethnicity Facts and Figures.

Since October 2017 we have taken action in education, employment, health, criminal justice and:

- Provided targeted employment supporting in 20 areas across the UK. The gap between employment rates of working age people in ethnic minority groups and in the whole population is now at a record low.
- Taken action on the recommendations of the Lammy review including to increase diversity of prison officer intake; funded development of an education programme to prepare lawyers from a range of backgrounds to apply for judicial office; and extended the range of justice data we provide broken down by ethnicity.
- Announced £90 million of funding from dormant bank accounts to support young people facing barriers to employment into work. Applications for the first allocation of this funding are open today to support grass roots organisations in Bradford, Birmingham and Barking and Dagenham.
- Started work to tackle disparities in the rate of exclusions in schools and the application of the Mental Health Act.

The audit’s website Ethnicity Facts and Figures has been continually updated and extended to allow the public to see if outcomes are getting better or worse across over 160 topics. We have taken a co-ordinated and strategic approach, led by the race disparity unit in Cabinet Office, which I oversee as chair of the inter-ministerial group.

Today, the Government are announcing further action to see employers adopting fair employment practices which ensure all staff, particularly those from an ethnic minority background, do as well as they are able in terms of recruitment and progression.

Specifically the Government are:

- Inviting employers to sign up to a Race at Work Charter, which sets out effective practices that support fairness at work;
- Setting new ambitions in key public services to increase the proportion of senior leaders who come from an ethnic minority background;
- Taking action through public procurement to encourage Government suppliers to adopt fair employment practices; and
- Consulting on how mandatory ethnicity pay reporting can best drive action without placing undue burdens on business.

Select Committees were notified of the publication of the consultation on ethnicity pay reporting and the update on the progress tackling racial disparity in the criminal justice system, and copies of relevant documents have been placed in the Library of the House.

[HCWS996]

**TREASURY**

**ECOFIN**

The Chancellor of the Exchequer (Mr Philip Hammond): An informal meeting of the Economic and Financial Affairs Council (ECOFIN) was held in Vienna on 7 and 8 September 2018. The Council discussed the following:

**WORKING LUNCH—THE EUROPEAN INVESTMENT BANK: ACHIEVEMENTS AND FUTURE CHALLENGES**

Based on a presidency issues note, the Council discussed the achievements and future challenges of the European Investment Bank (EIB).

**WORKING SESSION I**

The Council were then joined by Central Bank Governors for the first working session.

- Financial stability implications of increasing interest rates
- Following a presentation from the Centre for European Policy Studies, the Council discussed the financial stability implications of increasing interest rates.
- The economic potential and risk of crypto assets
- Following a presentation from Bruegel, the Council discussed the economic potential and risks of crypto assets.

**WORKING SESSION II**

**MFF 2021-27: DEEPING OF THE ECONOMIC AND MONETARY UNION**

The Council discussed issues in the context of the multiannual financial framework (MFF) for the period 2021-27 and the deepening of the economic and monetary union. Specifically, the Council held an exchange of views on proposals in relation to the InvestEU programme and the approach for strengthening structural reforms and macroeconomic stabilisation in the eurozone.

**WORKING SESSION III**

**FAIR TAXATION OF THE DIGITAL ECONOMY**

The Council held an exchange of views on fair taxation of the digital economy.

A meeting of the Economic and Financial Affairs Council (ECOFIN) was held in Luxembourg on 2 October 2018. The UK was represented by Mark Bowman (Director General, International Finance, HM Treasury). The Council discussed the following:

**Early morning session**

The Eurogroup President briefed the Council on the outcomes of the 1 October meeting of the Eurogroup, and the European Commission provided an update on the current economic situation in the EU.

**VAT “quick-fixes”**

The Council agreed a general approach in regards to: the directive on harmonising and simplifying certain rules in the VAT system and introducing the definitive system for the taxation of trade between member states; the regulation regarding certain exemptions for intra-community transactions; and the regulation regarding certified taxable persons.
VAT generalised reverse charge mechanism
The Council agreed a general approach on the VAT generalised reverse charge mechanism.

Anti-money laundering and prudential supervision
The Commission presented its amended proposal on improving supervision of the financial sector to ensure that anti-money laundering aspects are fully addressed.

Current financial services legislative proposals
The Austrian presidency provided an update on current legislative proposals in the field of financial services.

European semester 2018—lessons learnt
The Council held an exchange of views on lessons learnt from the European semester 2018.

Preparation of the G20 meeting of Finance Ministers and Central Bank Governors and of the IMF annual meetings between 11 and 14 October in Bali, Indonesia
The Council approved the EU’s G20 terms of reference and International Monetary and Financial Committee statement, ahead of the annual meetings in Bali, Indonesia.

Status of the implementation of financial services legislation
The Council discussed the status of the implementation of financial services legislation.

ENVIRONMENT, FOOD AND RURAL AFFAIRS
Agriculture and Fisheries Council
The Minister for Agriculture, Fisheries and Food (George Eustice): The Agriculture and Fisheries Council will take place on 15 October in Luxembourg. As the provisional agenda stands, the main focus for fisheries will be a regulation on fixing the fishing opportunities in the Baltic sea for 2019, for which a political agreement is sought.

The Council will then hold an exchange of views on the EU-Norway annual consultation for 2019. There will also be an exchange of views on the annual meeting of the International Commission for the Conservation of Atlantic Tunas (ICCAT).

For agriculture, the main item will be a progress report on the regulation on CAP strategic plans. The European Commission will also give a presentation on the G20 agriculture meeting.

FOREIGN AND COMMONWEALTH OFFICE
Foreign Affairs Council
The Minister for Europe and the Americas (Sir Alan Duncan): My right hon. Friend the Secretary of State for Foreign and Commonwealth Affairs will attend the Foreign Affairs Council (FAC) on 15 October. 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 FAC will discuss current affairs, external aspects of migration, Libya, the Central African Republic and Venezuela.

Ministers will adopt the new EU chemical weapons sanctions regime at the FAC. We look forward to early progress on the listing of relevant individuals and entities in due course. This is the first step towards bolstering the EU’s capabilities to address hybrid threats and the first in a package of sanctions regimes announced on 5 September. The Prime Minister set out the UK’s intentions to pursue new EU sanctions regimes related to chemical weapons, human rights, and cyber, in response to events in Salisbury and a wider pattern of malign activity. The Council will be an opportunity for the UK to call for the speedy adoption of a regime to address malicious cyber-attacks. We are working closely with EU partners to deliver on these priorities.

External aspects of migration
The Council will continue the discussions on migration initiated at the June European Council. This will include measures relating to search and rescue in the Mediterranean, regional disembarkation platforms and controlled centres. The UK will seek to ensure that these discussions are placed within the context of a comprehensive or whole of route approach to tackling irregular migration, where appropriate attention is paid to upstream activity and the fight against organised immigration crime (OIC).

Libya
Ministers will discuss developments in Libya following the recent deterioration in the security situation that prompted a P5, EU, African Union (AU), Arab League ministerial meeting during UNGA that was chaired by the French Foreign Minister Le Drian. The recent clashes are the most serious outbreak of violence in Tripoli since 2017 and have delayed progress on the constitutional and legal framework needed to enable elections to take place. Given the recent violence, discussions are likely to focus on the security challenges, and the resulting impact on the UN-led political process. We will underline the importance of the international community reaffirming its support to UN Secretary General’s Special Representative, (SRSG) Salamé and the UN-led political process, and emphasise that elections must be preceded by the necessary political, security and technical preparations.

Central African Republic
Ministers will discuss the security and humanitarian situation in the Central African Republic (CAR) and ongoing efforts to support the CAR Government achieve peace and stability. We will continue to emphasise the need for a co-ordinated and inclusive approach by all international partners. The AU facilitated peace process remains vital to ending the violence in CAR.

Venezuela
The Council will discuss the deteriorating humanitarian situation in Venezuela and the impact of Venezuelan migration on neighbouring countries and the wider region. The FAC will also consider what further actions might be possible to complement existing EU assistance. The FAC may also discuss a possible EU response when President Maduro begins his next term of office in January 2019; the EU stated that the presidential elections of May 2018 lacked any credibility and called for the holding of fresh presidential elections.
**HEALTH AND SOCIAL CARE**

**Cyber Resilience in Health and Care**

The Minister for Care (Caroline Dinenage): My hon. Friend the Under-Secretary of State for Health and Social Care (Lord O’Shaughnessy) has made the following written statement:

In February 2018 the Government published “Securing cyber resilience in health and care: A progress update”, which set out the actions taken to improve the cyber-security of the health and care system before and after last year’s largest ever WannaCry global ransomware attack, as well as our plans for the future. Today we are publishing a further update on progress and development of our future plans. In particular since February we have:

- increased our investment in securing local infrastructure in 2017-18 to over £60 million;
- signed a Windows 10 licensing agreement with Microsoft which will allow local NHS organisations to save money, reduce potential vulnerabilities and increase cyber-resilience; agreed £150 million of investment over the next three years; procured a new Cyber Security Operations Centre boosting the national capability to prevent, detect and respond to cyber-attacks;
- launched the data security and protection toolkit;
- agreed plans to implement the recommendations of the Chief Information Officer for Health and Care’s review of the May 2017 WannaCry attack;
- supported 25 local NHS organisations to improve their cyber-resilience via the NHS Digital “Blue Teams” pilot and;
- estimated the costs of the WannaCry attack.

NHS Digital is continuing to work closely with local areas to build resilience. This work forms part of the data and cyber security programme being led by the Department of Health and Social Care with its arm’s length bodies to improve the cyber-security of the health and care system.


[HCWS992]

**HOME DEPARTMENT**

**Immigration**

The Secretary of State for the Home Department (Sajid Javid): The Government deeply regret what has happened to the Windrush generation and are determined to right the wrongs they have experienced under successive Governments. The Home Office has put in place a series of measures to support those affected, one of which is the design of a compensation scheme to compensate those members of the Windrush generation who have faced difficulties in establishing their status under the immigration system.

On 19 July I published a consultation paper on the design of this compensation scheme for those who have suffered a loss as a result of these difficulties. This consultation was due to be open for a period of 12 weeks, closing today (11 October).

I am keen to ensure that the consultation exercise is thorough and allows sufficient opportunity for everyone who wants to respond, to do so. Martin Forde QC, the independent adviser appointed to oversee the development of the scheme, has written to me asking for the consultation period to be extended. This is based on his engagement with various community groups and the roadshows he has undertaken in recent weeks where people have said they need more time to respond. There are also a range of events over the coming weeks of Black History Month which would provide for a greater input into the consultation phase.

I have therefore agreed to extend the consultation by five weeks to 16 November. As I have said before I want to move quickly but carefully in establishing the scheme and this short extension balances the need to give people more time to respond to the consultation while minimising undue delay to the launch of the scheme.

Following the consultation my priority is to establish a scheme which will pay appropriate compensation as soon as possible. In the meantime, we will continue to offer people direct support to establish their immigration status.

My officials have already put several measures and initiatives in place to help those who are concerned about benefits, housing or employment. We believe that using established avenues of support is the best way of ensuring those in immediate need get the necessary support right now. Additional measures for those in immediate need include a dedicated team for vulnerable people within the Windrush taskforce, which has so far assisted over 450 people where an urgent need for support or advice has been identified; a “Fast-Track” service with the Department for Work and Pensions to confirm status and residence and arrange access to benefits; steps to secure accommodation with local authorities for those identified as homeless; and interim guidance to employers and landlords. We have also reached an agreement with Citizens Advice to provide bespoke professional advice, including debt advice, to anyone experiencing immediate financial problems.

There may be some urgent and exceptional cases where it is right to consider whether individual circumstances warrant a payment to be made before the compensation scheme is in place. I have asked my officials to develop a framework for considering such cases and I will publish that policy in due course.

[HCWS993]

**Immigration Health Surcharge**

The Minister for Immigration (Caroline Nokes): Our NHS is always there when you need it, paid for by British taxpayers. We welcome long-term migrants using the NHS, but believe it is right that they make a fair
contribution to its long-term sustainability. That was why we introduced the immigration health surcharge (IHS) in April 2015.

The IHS applies to non-European economic area (EEA) nationals subject to immigration control seeking to reside in the UK to work, study, or join family members for more than six months. Those who pay the charge may access the NHS on the same basis as UK residents for the duration of their lawful stay, i.e. they receive NHS care generally free of charge but may be charged for services a permanent resident would also pay for, such as prescription charges in England. The IHS has raised over £600 million and this money has been distributed to the Department of Health and Social Care and the health ministries in Scotland, Wales and Northern Ireland for health spending, in line with the Barnett formula.

The IHS is currently set at £200 per annum for most temporary migrant categories, with a discounted rate of £150 per annum for students and the youth mobility category. These rates have not changed since the IHS was introduced.

In February, the Government announced their intention to double the IHS. This followed a review by the Department of Health and Social Care of the evidence regarding the average cost to the NHS of treating surcharge payers. That review found that the average annual cost of NHS usage by those paying the surcharge is around £470 and that doubling the IHS could generate an additional £220 million a year for the NHS across the UK.

Today we have laid before Parliament in accordance with section 38 of the Immigration Act 2014, the Immigration (Health Charge) (Amendment) Order 2018. The order, which is subject to the affirmative procedure, seeks to double the IHS to £400 per annum. Students, as well as those on the youth mobility scheme, will continue to receive a discounted rate of £300. The order also makes some minor technical amendments to provide greater clarity about exchange rates, when payments are made in foreign currencies.

The proposed amount is still below full average cost recovery level and remains a good deal for those seeking to live in the UK temporarily. These changes do not affect permanent residents, who are not required to pay the IHS. Certain vulnerable groups such as asylum seekers and modern slavery victims are exempt from paying the IHS. Short-term migrants (including those on visitor visas) and those without permission to be in the UK are generally charged for secondary care treatment on visitor visas) and those without permission to be in the UK temporarily. These changes do not affect permanent residents, who are not required to pay

On 19 June, I announced a two-part review to look at the scheduling of cannabis-related medicinal products under the Misuse of Drugs Regulations 2001 (the 2001 regulations). I have been clear that my intention was always to ensure that patients have access to the most appropriate course of medical treatment. I stressed the importance of acting swiftly to ensure that where medically appropriate, these products could be available to be prescribed to patients. I have been clear that this should be achieved at the earliest opportunity while ensuring that the appropriate safeguards were in place to minimise the risks of misuse and diversion.

Building on the expert advice we have received, first from the chief medical adviser to the UK Government and then the Advisory Council on the Misuse of Drugs (ACMD), the regulations we have laid today give effect to my commitments. I outline in this statement the main features of our approach.

The 2018 regulations introduce a definition of “cannabis-based product for medicinal use in humans”. Only products meeting this definition will be rescheduled to schedule 2 to the 2001 regulations and de-designated from the 2015 designation order. Any product which does not satisfy this definition will remain a schedule 1 drug and only be available under a Home Office licence.

To constitute a “cannabis-based product for medicinal use in humans”, a product must satisfy three requirements:

- It needs to be a preparation or product which contains cannabis, cannabis resin, cannabis oil or a cannabinoid derivative;
- It is produced for medicinal use in humans; and
- Is a medicinal product, or a substance or preparation for use as an ingredient of, or in the production of an ingredient of, a medicinal product.

While the evidence base further develops and clinical expertise builds, the Government believe it is important that access to these products is strictly controlled so as to prevent unintended misuse, harm and diversion. The 2001 regulations therefore only allow three access routes for the order, supply and use of these products by patients. These are as follows:

A special medicinal product for use in accordance with a prescription or direction of a doctor (who has made the decision to prescribe) on the specialist register of the General Medical Council;

An investigational medicinal product without marketing authorisation for use in a clinical trial or;

A medicinal product with a marketing authorisation.

This brings these products explicitly into the existing medicines framework. There are well-established mechanisms for the supply of unlicensed medicines to patients with exceptional needs. Unlicensed medicines of this sort are known as “specials”. They can only be manufactured in or imported into the UK by a manufacturer or wholesale dealer that has a licence from the MHRA to do so and are expected to meet standards of good manufacturing practice (GMP).

The decision to prescribe is only restricted to a doctor on the specialist register of the General Medical Council where the cannabis-based product is an unlicensed “special” medicinal product for use by a specific patient. Once a product is licensed by the MHRA, it will be available for prescription in the same way as any other schedule 2 drug.

I have been consistently clear that I have no intention of legalising the recreational use of cannabis. To take account of the particular risk of misuse of cannabis by smoking and the operational impacts on enforcement...
agencies, the 2018 regulations continue to prohibit smoking of cannabis, including of cannabis-based products for medicinal use in humans.

Until recently, licences for schedule 1 drugs were generally issued for research purposes. As we have seen in recent cases, there may be exceptional circumstances which would require a schedule 1 licence to be issued for medicinal or treatment purposes. In the exceptional event that an individual will need to be issued a schedule 1 licence for treatment, the 2018 regulations will ensure that the Secretary of State can determine that no fee should be paid in that case.

Until the changes come into force on 1 November 2018, the independent expert panel, set up to provide me with clinical advice on individual licence applications, will remain in place to consider any application received before then.

These provisions will apply to England, Wales and Scotland. My officials continue to engage closely with the Department for Health in Northern Ireland, which intends to mirror these legislative amendments.

These regulations are not an end in themselves. The ACMD will be conducting a long-term review of cannabis and the National Institute for Health and Care Excellence (NICE) has commissioned to provide advice for clinicians by October next year. The Government will monitor the impact of the policy closely as the evidence base develops and review when the ACMD provides its final advice.

Further explanation of the legislative changes is set out in the explanatory memorandum to the regulations.

Immigration Rules

The Minister for Immigration (Caroline Nokes): My right hon. Friend the Home Secretary is today laying before Parliament a statement of changes in immigration rules. This is the latest in the regular, half-yearly series of changes to the immigration rules. The changes have three main purposes.

First, they implement the next phase of the roll-out of the EU settlement scheme for resident EU citizens and their family members to obtain UK immigration status. The immigration rules for the scheme, set out in appendix EU, came into force on 28 August 2018, for the purposes of an initial private beta test phase, involving 12 NHS trusts and three universities in north-west England. This phase has enabled us successfully to test some of the functionality and processes of the scheme in a live environment.

I have today written to the right hon. Member for Normanton, Pontefract and Castleford (Yvette Cooper), the Chair of the Home Affairs Committee, with our early findings from the initial private beta phase and I will place a copy of that letter in the Library of the House. We will continue to monitor the findings from this phase and will publish a report on those findings, including how they will inform the scheme’s development, as we move into a second private beta phase in November.

Overall, the technology performed well, with some minor improvements identified to improve the overall customer experience, and feedback from applicants on the speed and ease of the application process has been very positive. The initial private beta phase has enabled us to test components of the online application process. We now need to test that online process as an integrated, end-to-end process.

We are therefore moving ahead with a second private beta phase, which, as set out in this statement of changes, will run from 1 November to 21 December 2018. It will also significantly scale up the testing, including, on a voluntary basis and with the agreement of the devolved Administrations, staff in the higher education, health and social care sectors across the UK. This phase will also include some vulnerable individuals being supported by a small number of local authorities and civil society organisations so that we can test the operation of the scheme for those with support needs. I am grateful to all the organisations and their staff taking part in the testing and thereby helping us to establish the EU settlement scheme as effectively as possible.

We currently expect that the further phased implementation of the scheme will be secured through further immigration rules changes to be laid before Parliament in December 2018 (for implementation in January 2019), and in early March 2019, so that the scheme will be fully open by our exit from the EU.

Secondly, further to my written ministerial statement of 13 September 2018, Official Report, column 36WS (HCWS961), this statement of changes introduces a form of leave to remain for those children transferred to the UK as part of the Calais camp clearance to reunite with family between October 2016 and July 2017 and who do not qualify for international protection (i.e. refugee status or humanitarian protection). It is our view that all those 549 children transferred from Calais to the UK to reunite with family should be able to remain here with their family members. We do not consider that it would be in their best interests as children to separate them from their families, having received significant support from the UK authorities to reunite and integrate here.

Thirdly, this statement of changes amends the immigration rules on the requirements for a valid application to support the operation of the new application process in UK Visas and Immigration, and specifies evidence for medical exemption from knowledge of language and/or life in the UK requirements. The new application process will mean that customers in the UK applying to extend their stay or apply for citizenship will be able to submit key documents and personal information in a more secure way with the support of designated staff. UK Visas and Immigration will no longer generally handle physical evidence when considering a case, so the majority of customers will be able to retain their passport, and all customers will be able to retain their supporting evidence as part of the application process. UK Visas and Immigration aims to deliver a world-class customer experience that is competitive, flexible and accessible; and the launch of these new, more efficient front-end services this November is a big step towards that goal.

The Secretary of State for Transport (Chris Grayling):

I would like to update the House on the progress of High Speed 2.
High Speed 2 will be the backbone of our country’s rail network. The first major railway to be built north of London for 150 years, it will improve connectivity between our major cities and increase rail capacity where it is most needed by adding extra services onto our busiest routes. Once completed, HS2 is planned to serve around 300,000 people each day. No alternative transport option can achieve such an increase in rail capacity and connectivity.

HS2 is truly national in its scope and can be a transformative project for our country. Its vision is to be a catalyst for economic growth.

HS2 Ltd was set-up in January 2009. The progress it is making on the project is outlined in its annual report and accounts for 2017-18, published on 23 July 2018, and its corporate plan for 2018-21, published on 19 June 2018. In September 2018 HS2 Ltd also published its skills, employment and education strategy which sets out an aim to help the next generation develop the technical skills not only to design and build HS2, but to deliver the project pipeline of the UK’s future infrastructure and leave a lasting skills legacy for the country. The training, apprenticeships and foundation degrees offered at the national college for high speed rail, with campuses in Doncaster and Birmingham, are central to our strategy.

HS2 is already delivering economic benefits across the UK. Around 7,000 jobs are already supported by the project and designing and building the railway is forecast at peak to support around 30,000 jobs, including 2,000 apprentices. Around 2,000 businesses from across the UK have already been awarded contracts to support the project.

HS2 is not an end in itself, but rather a means to achieving balanced growth, investing in transport to unlock jobs, regeneration and housing, and creating a more prosperous national economy. In July 2018 outgoing HS2 Ltd chair Sir David Higgins published his report “HS2: Realising the Potential” demonstrating that the benefits of HS2 are already being realised across the UK. Places on the route, including Leeds, Manchester, Toton and Crewe, have outlined bold plans in their development of Phase 1, and to allow Northern Powerhouse Rail, are under development.

The development of these strategies was a recommendation from the HS2 growth taskforce report in 2014. We continue to work with places on the HS2 route on the delivery of their plans and undertake periodic assessments of progress to ensure the full potential of HS2 is being realised.

**HS2 Phase 1**

On Phase 1 (West Midlands to London), design and enabling works are ongoing. Major procurements have included: issuing an invitation-to-tender for rolling stock; Lend Lease has been appointed as the master development partner for Euston station, to work with HS2 Ltd, the London Borough of Camden and others to develop a master plan for the sustainable mixed use development at the Euston station site; and HS2 Ltd has awarded design contracts for the four new high speed stations in Birmingham and London.

**HS2 Phase 2a**

In 2015 the Government announced their intention to accelerate the delivery of Phase 2a (West Midlands to Crewe). The hybrid Bill passed its Second Reading on 30 January 2018 by 295 votes to 12; the Select Committee published its Second Special Report of Session in July 2018, to which the Government will respond in the autumn. The legislation will return to the House in spring 2019 for further consideration.

**HS2 Phase 2b and the working draft environmental statement**

On Phase 2b (Crewe to Manchester and West Midlands to Leeds), we are making further significant progress. This phase will complete the full “Y network” and deliver the full benefits of the scheme in terms of capacity, connectivity and economic growth across the UK. In July 2017, I confirmed the route from Crewe to Manchester and Birmingham to Leeds. I am today announcing a consultation by HS2 Ltd on the working draft environmental statement for Phase 2b, which is a key part of preparing the future hybrid Bill to seek powers for its construction. The consultation will run for 10 weeks.

The working draft environmental statement gives those affected the chance to review and comment on initial assessments of the environmental impacts from HS2 Phase 2b. It shows the consolidated construction boundary, proposed construction methodologies at each site, construction and operational phase plans, environmental mitigation and land take to support important work such as habitat replacement, rail heads and construction traffic routes. Responses to the consultation will allow HS2 Ltd to improve its understanding of the impacts, risks and concerns that residents and businesses may have concerning the route.

The consultation outcome will inform the design, mitigation and environmental impact assessment of Phase 2b ahead of the statutory environmental statement, which will be published as part of the hybrid Bill for Phase 2b.

The working draft environmental statement includes a non-technical summary; 28 community area reports; and a working draft equalities impact assessment which assesses the impact of the proposed Phase 2b scheme against the requirements of the public sector equality duty. To support the consultation, HS2 Ltd will be arranging 30 consultations events in the community areas along the Phase 2b route.

It is important to note that the working draft environmental statement is based on the Phase 2b route confirmed in summer 2017. A range of further potential local changes to the route, in particular to facilitate Northern Powerhouse Rail, are under development. Last year we provided £300 million to future proof HS2 for the proposed Northern Powerhouse Rail, which is a major strategic rail programme designed to transform connectivity between the key economic centres of the north. I expect to consult on such changes separately next year. In particular, the working draft environmental statement shows an “HS2 only” design for stations at Manchester airport and Manchester Piccadilly, which would, I am told by the North’s strategic business case for Northern Powerhouse Rail is due in late 2018 and we will consider how these designs could be modified to support future plans for Northern Powerhouse Rail.

In order to reflect changes to parliamentary timetables after the 2017 General Election and lessons from the development of Phase 1, and to allow Northern Powerhouse
Rail interfaces to be properly explored for the Phase 2b hybrid Bill, I am updating the intended deposit date for the HS2 Phase 2b hybrid Bill to mid-2020. The intended opening date for Phase 2b remains unchanged at 2033.

This update on progress follows a previous update in July 2017 when we announced the Phase 2b route. The Government will ensure that Parliament is provided with further updates on HS2's progress at least once a year.

Copies of the working draft environmental statement, non-technical summary and the working draft equalities impact assessment have been deposited in the Libraries of both Houses.
The net present value of the assets if held to maturity was estimated by UKAR’s advisers to be £741 million using Green Book assumptions. UKAR received £943 million in exchange for the assets.

I will update the House of any further changes to B&B and NRAM as necessary.

[HCWS1009]

**Finance (No.3) Bill**

The Financial Secretary to the Treasury (Mel Stride): Finance (No.3) Bill will be published on Wednesday 7 November.

Explanatory notes on the Bill will be available in the Vote Office and the Printed Paper Office and placed in the Libraries of both Houses on that day.

Copies of the explanatory notes will also be available at: www.gov.uk.

[HCWS1002]

**JHA Opt-in Decision: Sovereign Bond Backed Securities**

The Economic Secretary to the Treasury (John Glen): The Government have decided not to opt in to a provision in the proposed EU regulation on an enabling framework for sovereign bond backed securities that aims to remove unwarranted regulatory obstacles to the market-led development of sovereign bond backed securities (SBBS), which currently do not yet exist in practice. This is primarily a matter for member states in the euro area whose Government bonds would be included in the scope of the product and therefore whose national debt markets would be affected. The proposal is currently stalled due to significant opposition from member states and industry.

Article 17 of the proposed regulation requires that where member states have chosen to lay down rules for criminal sanctions, they shall ensure that information can be shared between competent authorities in the EU. As the provision requires co-operation involving law enforcement bodies, the Government believe these are JHA obligations and therefore our JHA opt-in is triggered.

The Government have decided not to opt in to these provisions as there are no significant benefits to be gained from doing so. The obligation to share information will only fall on member states who have a relevant criminal sanctions regime. The Government have no intention to introduce a criminal sanctions regime in a way that would lead to this regulation imposing an obligation on the UK or on our competent authorities.

[HCWS1004]

**Counter-Terrorist Asset Freezing**

The Economic Secretary to the Treasury (John Glen): Under the Terrorist Asset-Freezing etc. Act 2010 (TAFA 2010), the Treasury is required to prepare a quarterly report regarding its exercise of the powers conferred on
it by Part 1 of TAFA 2010. This written statement satisfies that requirement for the period 1 April 2018 to 30 June 2018.

This report also covers the UK’s implementation of the UN’s ISIL (Daesh) and Al-Qaida asset freezing regime (ISIL-AQ), and the operation of the EU’s asset freezing regime under EU regulation (EC) 2580/2001 concerning external terrorist threats to the EU (also referred to as the CP 931 regime).

Under the UN’s ISIL-AQ asset freezing regime, the UN has responsibility for designations and the Treasury, through the Office of Financial Sanctions Implementation (OFSI), has responsibility for licensing and compliance with the regime in the UK under the ISIL (Daesh) and Al-Qaida (Asset-Freezing) Regulations 2011.

Under EU Regulation 2580/2001, the EU has responsibility for designations and OFSI has responsibility for licensing and compliance with the regime in the UK under Part 1 of TAFA 2010.

A new EU asset freezing regime under EU Regulation 2016/1686 was implemented on 22 September 2016. This permits the EU to make autonomous Al-Qaida and ISIL (Daesh) listings.

The attached tables set out the key asset-freezing activity in the UK during the quarter.

The recently passed Sanctions and Anti-Money Laundering Act 2018 (SAMLA) will help ensure that UK counter-terrorist sanctions powers remain a useful tool for law enforcement and intelligence agencies to consider utilising, while also meeting the UK’s international obligations.

Under SAMLA, a designation could be made where there are reasonable grounds to suspect that the person or group is or has been involved in a defined terrorist activity and that designation is appropriate. This approach is in line with the UK’s current approach under UN and EU sanctions and would be balanced by procedural protections such as the ability of designated persons to challenge the Government in court.

Attachments can be viewed online at: http://www.parliament.uk/business/publications/written-questions-answers-statements/written-statement/Commons/2018-10-15/HCWS1003/

[HCWS1003]

DEFENCE

Defence Industry and Shipbuilding: Response to a Resolution of the House

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Defence (Stuart Andrew): I would like to thank all hon. and right hon. Members, my predecessor, the hon. Member for Aberconwy, (Guto Bebb) and the Minister for Defence People and Veterans the Under-Secretary of State for Defence, my right hon. Friend the Member for Bournemouth East (Mr Ellwood) for their contribution to the Opposition Day debate on Defence Industry and Shipbuilding which took place on 11 July 2018. The passionate and constructive comments of Members clearly demonstrated this House’s support for shipbuilding.

Naval shipbuilding has a particularly important place in our defence industry. As a maritime nation, our prosperity as well as our security hinges on the strength of our navy.

All Royal Navy warships, by which we mean destroyers, frigates and aircraft carriers, will have a UK-owned design, and will be built and integrated in the UK.

All other naval vessels, including Royal Fleet Auxiliaries, will be procured through international competition to secure the best designs and value for money for the UK taxpayer. This does not mean that other naval vessels cannot be built in the UK, rather, it means the UK shipbuilding industry has an opportunity to put forward internationally competitive and innovative bids. We have actively engaged UK shipyards to take part in the Fleet Solid Support ships competition. It is in the Government’s and the taxpayers’ interests to have a robust competition and we anticipate receiving strong bids from UK shipyards.

We will continue to work closely with the defence industry to energise this crucial sector of our economy to achieve our strategic aim—to have a modern, innovative, internationally competitive sector capable of meeting the country’s defence and security needs, both now and in the future.

[HCWS999]

Grant in Kind

The Minister for the Armed Forces (Mark Lancaster): I have today laid before Parliament a Ministry of Defence departmental minute describing a gifting package which the UK intends to make to the Government of Nigeria.

This gift, a grant in kind, is comprised of a range of equipment intended to equip Nigerian army specialists facing Boko Haram militants in North-East Nigeria. Improvised explosive devices (IEDs) are an insidious and pervasive threat faced daily by Nigerian military personnel deployed in the struggle against Boko Haram. Not only do they pose a significant threat to the lives of Nigerian soldiers, but their impact on humanitarian access is severe, and if left unaddressed they will threaten civilian lives for many years to come.

The equipment granted by the UK, including metal detectors and other specialised C-IED equipment, meets a specific request by the Nigerian armed forces for C-IED assistance. It will complement the delivery of UK military training, help meet an identified operational requirement, and, most importantly, it will help save lives.

The departmental minute, which I have today laid before Parliament, describes a gifting package to the Nigerian armed forces comprised of priority items that provide immediate benefits. These items are metal detectors, binoculars, equipment to access and manipulate suspect devices, and equipment to facilitate their safe disposal.

Subject to completion of the departmental minute process, delivery is expected to be undertaken over the coming weeks. The total cost of this proposed package of equipment is approximately £775,000.

[HCWS1000]
**DIGITAL, CULTURE, MEDIA AND SPORT**

**Loneliness Strategy**

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Digital, Culture, Media and Sport (Tracey Crouch): I refer to my oral statement made to the House on the evening of 15 October.

**EXITING THE EUROPEAN UNION**

**EU Exit**

The Secretary of State for Exiting the European Union (Dominic Raab): As announced by the Prime Minister and the Secretary of State for Exiting the European Union on 18 July 2018, the Government are publishing a series of technical notices. We published 25 of these notices on 23 August, 28 on 13 September, and 24 on 24 September. Last Friday, 12 October 2018, we published a further 29 notices. These notices are designed to inform people, businesses and stakeholders about steps they may need to take in the event of a no-deal scenario.

Notices were published on the following areas:
- Accounting and audit if there is no Brexit deal
- Breeding animals if there is no Brexit deal
- Classifying, labelling and packaging chemicals if there is no Brexit deal
- Commercial fishing if there is no Brexit deal
- Consumer rights if there is no Brexit deal
- Control on mercury if there is no Brexit deal
- Control on persistent organic pollutants if there is no Brexit deal
- Existing free trade agreements if there is no Brexit deal
- Export and import of hazardous chemicals if there is no Brexit deal
- Exporting GM food and animal feed products if there is no Brexit deal
- Exporting objects of cultural interest if there is no Brexit deal
- Funding for British Overseas Territories if there is no Brexit deal
- Geo-blocking of online content if there is no Brexit deal
- Health marks on meat, fish and dairy products if there is no Brexit deal
- Importing high-risk food and animal feed if there is no Brexit deal
- Maintaining the continuity of waste shipments if there is no Brexit deal
- Meeting climate change requirements if there is no Brexit deal
- Meeting rail safety and standards if there is no Brexit deal
- Plant variety rights and marketing of seed and propagating material if there is no Brexit deal
- Providing services including those of a qualified professional if there is no Brexit deal
- Rail transport if there is no Brexit deal
- Regulating biocidal products if there is no Brexit deal
- Regulating pesticides if there is no Brexit deal
- Sanctions policy if there is no Brexit deal
- Structuring your business if there is no Brexit deal
- Taking horses abroad if there is no Brexit deal

Trading and moving endangered species protected by CITES if there is no Brexit deal
Trading electricity if there is no Brexit deal
Trading gas with the EU if there is no Brexit deal

Notices are being published on gov.uk. These can be found here: https://www.gov.uk/government/collections/how-to-prepare-if-the-uk-leaves-the-eu-with-no-deal.

Copies of notices will be placed in the Libraries of both Houses to ensure all Members have access.

**General Affairs Council**

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Exiting the European Union (Mr Robin Walker): Lord Callanan, Minister of State for Exiting the European Union, has made the following statement:

I will attend the General Affairs Council in Luxembourg on 16 October 2018 to represent the UK. Until we leave the European Union, we remain committed to fulfilling our rights and obligations as a full member.

The provisional agenda includes:
- Preparation of the European Council on 18 October 2018 and European Council follow up
- The Council will discuss the draft conclusions for the October European Council. The conclusions are expected to cover migration, internal security and external relations.
- The presidency will also provide an update on progress in implementing previous European Council conclusions.
- Rule of Law in Poland/Article 7(1) Treaty of the European Union (TEU) reasoned proposal
- The Commission will provide Ministers with an update on the rule of law in Poland and will invite Poland to provide a response.
- Rule of Law in Hungary/Article 7(1) Treaty of the European Union (TEU) reasoned proposal
- The presidency is expected to provide Ministers with an indication of how it intends to organise future Council proceedings following the triggering of the Article 7(1) TEU procedure for Hungary.
- Multianual financial framework 2021-2027
- Ministers will discuss progress on the multianual financial framework proposals with the presidency.

**HEALTH AND SOCIAL CARE**

**Child Death Review**

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Health and Social Care (Jackie Doyle-Price): Today I am publishing, on behalf of the Government, the statutory and operational guidance “Child Death Review” which outlines the framework which all practitioners involved in a review of a child’s death should follow. Clinical Commissioning Groups and Local Authorities, as the new child death review partners, must make local arrangements for the review of all child deaths, in England.

The policy of child death reviews has, until recently, been the responsibility of the Department for Education. I welcome the Prime Minister’s decision on the transfer of policy for child death review set out in her written statement to the House on 18 July. This change will result in child deaths becoming part of the national Learning from Deaths Programme and its aim is to
learn lessons to save more children’s lives and ensure that the way the NHS engages with the bereaved, continuously improves.

Related areas that remain the responsibility of the Department for Education include children’s social care including safeguarding children and child protection.

The revisions to the child death review process have been necessary to reflect the legislative changes introduced through the Children and Social Work Act 2017. The reforms underpin a stronger but more flexible statutory framework—one that will support local partners to work together more effectively to review the deaths of children in order to try to prevent deaths recurring by the same cause.

The findings from local reviews will be reported to the National Child Mortality Database (from April 2019), where the information, for the first time will be analysed centrally and will provide additional learning beyond what can be achieved by local systems. The data will be analysed at the Child Mortality Data Unit at the University of Bristol and will be used to inform strategic improvements in health and social care for children, and to help health and social care providers to learn about how they can reduce child deaths.

NHS England plan to publish shortly “When a Child Dies - A Guide for Parents and Carers”. The guide has been developed by a group of bereaved parents, and support organisations and professionals.

Child Death review is an important piece of guidance for agencies, organisations and practitioners to know what they must do individually and collectively to robustly and thoroughly review and learn from every child death. [HCWS998]

HOME DEPARTMENT

Offensive Weapons Bill Memorandum

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for the Home Department (Victoria Atkins): I am today placing in the Library of the House the Department’s analysis on the application of Standing Order 83L in respect of the Government amendments tabled for Commons Report stage for the Offensive Weapons Bill Scheduled for the 15 October 2018. [HCWS1001]

HOUSING, COMMUNITIES AND LOCAL GOVERNMENT

Leasehold Reform

The Secretary of State for Housing, Communities and Local Government (James Brokenshire): I have published a technical consultation on how to implement the Government’s reforms to the leasehold system in England. This consultation marks the next step in my personal commitment to tackle exploitative and unjustifiable practices in the leasehold sector, making homeownership fairer for all.

Unjust leasehold terms also risk making relatively new houses unattractive to buyers. Therefore, last year the Government announced they would introduce legislation to prohibit the unjustified granting of new residential long leases on new build or existing freehold houses, other than in exceptional circumstances, and restrict ground rents in newly established leases of houses and flats to a peppercorn.

In addition, we want to address loopholes in the law to improve transparency and fairness for leaseholders and freeholders. This includes providing freeholders with equivalent rights to leaseholders to enable them to challenge the reasonableness of estate rent charges or freehold service charges for the maintenance of communal arrears and facilities on a private or mixed estate.

Finally, we want to introduce measures to improve how leasehold properties are bought and sold.

The consultation details a number of proposals setting out how our plans may work in practice. It asks important questions to understand people’s views on how this could affect them. It sets out and seeks views on:

- how the changes to prevent unjustified new leasehold houses will work in practice, in what circumstances any exemptions will be provided, and how the policy will be enforced;
- the future nominal ground rent for new leasehold properties being capped at £10 per annum, and what exceptional circumstances may warrant exemption;
- how we intend to provide freeholders with equivalent rights to leaseholders to enable them to challenge the reasonableness of an estate rent charge or a freehold service charge for the maintenance of communal arrears and facilities on a private or mixed estate; and
- measures to improve how leasehold properties are bought and sold.

We will use the evidence we gather to inform the legislation and the accompanying impact assessment.

The consultation will run for six weeks and will close on 26 November 2018. It is available online at: https://www.gov.uk/government/consultations/implementing-reforms-to-the-leasehold-system, and I have placed a copy in the House Library.

Since becoming Secretary of State, I have already taken steps to ensure excessive and unfair leasehold practices are brought to an end. No new Government funding schemes will now support the unjustified use of leasehold for new houses.

This consultation, and the legislation which will follow, will make the leasehold system fairer, more transparent, and cheaper for home owners in the future. [HCWS1010]

Ratings (Property in Common Occupation) and Council Tax (Empty Dwellings) Bill

The Secretary of State for Housing, Communities and Local Government (James Brokenshire): I am today placing in the Library of the House the Department’s analysis on the application of Standing Order 83O in respect of any motion relating to a Lords amendment for Commons consideration of Lords amendments stage for the Ratings (Property in Common Occupation) and Council Tax (Empty Dwellings) Bill. [HCWS1006]
Written Statements

Tuesday 16 October 2018

DEFENCE

Armed Forces Pay Review Body

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Defence (Mr Tobias Ellwood): I am pleased to announce that I have invited Lesley Mercer to continue to serve as a member of the Armed Forces Pay Review Body for a further three-year term of office, commencing on 1 March 2019. This appointment has been conducted in accordance with the guidance of the Office of the Commissioner for Public Appointments.

[HCWS1013]

ENVIRONMENT, FOOD AND RURAL AFFAIRS

Domestic Farm Support Funding

The Secretary of State for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs (Michael Gove): Today I am announcing that the Government are launching an independent review into the allocation of domestic farm support from 2020 to the end of this Parliament. The review will make sure that fair funding is delivered to all four parts of the UK when we leave the EU.

The review will provide recommendations to the Government on factors to take into account in the split of agricultural funding between the four countries of England, Scotland, Wales and Northern Ireland, once the UK has left the common agricultural policy.

In forming its recommendations, the review will look at what factors should influence the distribution of agricultural funding, while ensuring the effective use of public funds. Each country’s unique circumstances will be considered, including its environmental, agricultural and socioeconomic make-up. Both the number of farms and the size of farms in each country could also be considered, to make sure that each part of the UK gets a fair deal. The review will be informed by historical CAP decisions but will not revisit these, or redistribute money that has already been committed.

We have already confirmed that we will continue to commit the same cash total in funds for UK farm support until the end of the Parliament, expected in 2022, providing British farmers with more certainty than farmers across the EU, where funding is only guaranteed until 2020.

This review will be led and overseen by an independent external reviewer. I am delighted that Lord Bew of Donegore has agreed to chair the review. Lord Bew has been the Chair of the Committee on Standards in Public Life for five years, held esteemed positions in government and contributed to a number of Bills, reviews and reports during his time as a non-party political peer.

Lord Bew will be joined on the panel by representatives from each devolved Administration to ensure that their voices are heard. Membership of this group will be confirmed in due course.

The terms of reference for the review have been published on the gov.uk website today. The review will report in March 2019 and the findings of the review will be published on gov.uk in due course.

[HCWS1016]

HOME DEPARTMENT

G6 Lyon

The Secretary of State for the Home Department (Sajid Javid): The informal G6 group of Interior Ministers held its most recent meeting in Lyon on 8 and 9 October 2017. Representatives from the USA, Morocco and the European Commission also attended the meeting.

The summit was chaired by the French Prime Minister and Interim Interior Minister, Edouard Philippe. I represented the United Kingdom. The other participating States were represented by Dr Joachim Brudzinski (Minister of the Interior, Poland), Dr Stephan Mayer (State Secretary, Germany), Matteo Salvini (Minister of the Interior, Italy) and Fernando Grande-Marlaska (Minister of the Interior, Spain).

Morocco was represented by Interior Minister Abdelouafi Laftit. The European Commission was represented by Dimitris Avramopoulos (Commissioner for Migration, Home Affairs and Citizenship) and Sir Julian King (Commissioner for the Security Union). The United States was represented by Jeff Sessions (Attorney General USA) and Claire Grady (acting Deputy Secretary, Department of Homeland Security). Gilles de Kerchove, the EU’s counter-terrorism co-ordinator, also attended.

The G6 commenced with a working dinner focused on managing illegal migration flows. During the discussion I promoted the UK’s efforts to tackle people smuggling and human trafficking, and highlighted the UK’s work upstream and our commitment to work with EU partners on this after we leave the EU. I also stressed the importance of recognising that organised crime is a key threat we need to address.

The second plenary session was on combatting the threat of returning foreign terrorist fighters. During this session I referred to the UK’s cross-governmental approach to managing returnees and the need for an end-to-end holistic approach to the issue.

The third session was a working lunch which focused on security co-operation with Sahel countries. During this session I highlighted the UK’s commitment to the region and discussed our support on security and stabilisation. I also encouraged partners to share information to develop shared understanding of local issues and highlighted the problem of the use of kidnap for ransom as a source of terrorist funding.

The final session considered terrorist use of the internet. I highlighted the fact that the UK is leading the way on preventing terrorist use of the internet, encouraged the G6 to support the UK’s strategic approach of engaging directly with content service providers and sought their support for action to combat child sexual exploitation online.

The next G6 will take place in Germany in 2019.

[HCWS1014]
Security Industry Authority

The Minister for Policing and the Fire Service (Mr Nick Hurd): The 2017-18 annual report and accounts for the Security Industry Authority (HC 1643) is being laid before the House today and will published on www.gov.uk. Copies will be available in the Vote Office.

[HCWS1015]

INTERNATIONAL TRADE

Informal Trade Foreign Affairs Council: 5 October 2018

The Minister for Trade Policy (George Hollingbery): The Informal EU Foreign Affairs Council (Trade) took place in Innsbruck on 5 October 2018. The agenda covered the WTO, EU-US trade and EU trade agreements. I represented the UK at the meeting. A summary of the discussions follow.

On WTO modernisation, the discussion confirmed that the most urgent issue was unblocking appointments to the WTO Appellate Body. Many WTO members were looking to the EU for leadership on this matter. I reaffirmed the UK’s support for the rules-based trading system, commended the Commission’s concept paper on WTO modernisation, and called for engagement with the wider WTO membership.

On EU-US trade, discussion was on the agreement set out in the EU-US joint statement following President Juncker’s visit to the White House and progress since July, noting that the near-term focus was on voluntary regulatory co-operation with full respect for domestic legislation. A limited tariff liberalisation was on offer from the EU, provided it focused only on industrial goods. I expressed opposition to US measures on steel and aluminium and threatened measures on autos, offered support to the Commission’s approach of prioritising regulatory co-operation, and agreed with others that there should be no lowering of standards.

On ongoing FTA negotiations, the priority for the Japan EPA to be approved by the European Parliament was highlighted. Attendees also expressed continued support for the range of other EU trade agreements.

[HCWS1012]
Written Statements

Wednesday 17 October 2018

JUSTICE

Civil Liability Bill

The Minister of State, Ministry of Justice (Rory Stewart): I have today published a written submission outlining the Government’s analysis of how the English votes for English laws principle in accordance with the application of Standing Order 83L relates to the Government amendment tabled for Commons Report stage of the Civil Liability Bill.

The Department’s assessment is that the amendment does not change the territorial application of the Bill. The analysis holds if the Government amendment is accepted.

I have deposited a copy of the submission in the Libraries of both Houses.

WORK AND PENSIONS

Employment and Support Allowance

The Minister for Disabled People, Health and Work (Sarah Newton): This written statement is a further update to the House on progress in correcting historic ESA underpayments and paying arrears.

The Department began work to assess cases in December 2017. For that stage of the exercise we expect to review around 320,000 cases, of which around 105,000 are likely to be due arrears.

We now have a team of over 400 staff working through these cases and have paid around £120 million in arrears. We expect to complete the vast majority of this part of the exercise by April 2019, and have to date completed all cases where an individual is terminally ill and responded to the review, thereby ensuring they receive due priority.

The announcement in July to pay cases back to the point of conversion requires us to review an additional 250,000 cases, of which we estimate around 75,000 could be due arrears. We will undertake this work through the course of 2019. We now have a team of over 400 staff working through these cases, with a further 400 due to join the team through October and November, and will be assigning more staff to review the additional 250,000 cases. This will enable us to complete this important activity at pace.

The Department is publishing an ad hoc statistical publication today setting out further detail on the progress it has made in processing cases and revised estimates of the impacts of this exercise, including details of the number of claimants due arrears and the amounts likely to be paid. This will be published on gov.uk.

There are currently around 2.3 million working-age people on employment and support allowance. In 2018-19, £54 billion will be spent on benefits to support disabled people and people with health conditions this year, which is over 6% of all Government spending and a record high.

A frequently asked question guide will also be deposited in the Library of the House for further information.
CABINET OFFICE

Infected Blood Inquiry

The Chancellor of the Duchy of Lancaster and Minister for the Cabinet Office (Mr David Lidington): On 24 September, I attended the commemoration that preceded the preliminary hearings of the infected blood inquiry, and watched the moving and powerful testimony from those infected and affected by the infected blood scandal. The commemoration brought home the terrible human cost of this tragedy, and emphasised to me the importance of this inquiry, to get to the truth of what happened, and provide the answers that the people infected and affected so desperately need.

When the public inquiry was launched in July this year, I deferred making a decision on whether to appoint a panel to sit with Sir Brian until he was able to take the view of core participants. Sir Brian Langstaff wrote to me this week following the preliminary hearings, and has advised me that he has now done so, and there has been no demand for a panel. In the place of single experts, sitting as panellists, Sir Brian is establishing expert groups to provide openness and transparency across a range of truly expert opinion. He recommended that I should not appoint co-determining panel members. I accept his recommendation.

In his letter Sir Brian also called for action in relation to financial and psychological support for the affected and infected. The Government will consider those comments and Sir Brian’s recommendations carefully and will respond as soon as possible.

The Cabinet Office takes seriously its role as sponsor to the infected blood inquiry and is determined to do all it can to support the inquiry with its work. Regrettably, an administrative error earlier this year has come to light, which had delayed the circulation of an instruction to Government Departments about the retention of records. I can reassure the public that this has resulted in no actual harm, but it is an error for which I apologise to the inquiry, and most importantly, to the people infected and affected.

The facts are these: Cabinet Office officials circulated a Government-wide notice on 3 April this year, instructing Departments to preserve all information relevant to the infected blood inquiry. A further, more comprehensive message was issued to Departments by the Cabinet Office on 11 June.

However, following a query from the inquiry about the notice, Cabinet Office officials discovered that the 3 April email containing the retention notice did not reach its recipients, due to the failure of the collective IT address used. My officials have provided a detailed explanation to the inquiry which will be published on the inquiry’s website.

Since the error was discovered, all relevant Departments and relevant areas within Departments have worked urgently to confirm that they have not destroyed any documents relevant to the inquiry during the period between 3 April and 11 June. Because of their size and the complexity of some of the records they hold, the Crown Courts and Tribunals Service and the Legal Aid Agency are continuing to work to provide this assurance and have committed to doing so as urgently as possible.

The Department of Health and Social Care put in place a moratorium on the destruction of historical records as soon as the inquiry was announced in July 2017. No material damage has resulted from this administrative error, but I am very sorry it occurred, and I would like to reassure the public that the Cabinet Office will learn the lessons from this to avoid such an error occurring in future.

[HCWS1021]

HOME DEPARTMENT

Modern Slavery: 2018 Annual Report

The Secretary of State for the Home Department (Sajid Javid): Today, I am publishing the 2018 UK annual report on modern slavery. The report covers the whole of the UK and has been drafted in collaboration with the Northern Ireland Executive, the Scottish Government and the Welsh Government. This report sets out an assessment of the scale of modern slavery in the UK, and outlines the actions that have been taken to combat it over the last year.

A copy of the report will be placed in the Library of the House.

[HCWS1020]

JUSTICE

Justice and Home Affairs Post-Council Statement

The Lord Chancellor and Secretary of State for Justice (Mr David Gauke): I attended the Justice and Home Affairs Council for Justice day on Thursday 11 October in Luxembourg.

The Council reached a general approach on the insololvency restructuring and second chance directive.

During the discussion on e-evidence legislation, Ministers agreed not to include real-time interception within the scope of the regulation and asked for further work on the extent of the obligation to notify other states when data is sought direct from a service provider. I offered to share UK experience from our bilateral discussions with the US on a data access agreement, which was welcomed by the Commission.

With regard to the draft conclusions on the application of the charter of fundamental rights in 2017, 20 member states, including the UK, supported the Netherlands proposal for the adoption of “presidency conclusions” given the lack of consensus for Council conclusions.

The director of the Fundamental Rights Agency presented his annual review of the fundamental rights situation in the European Union (EU), noting rising levels of hate crime, including anti-Semitism, and
discrimination faced by immigrants and minority groups. He also referred to Roma communities living without basic amenities such as electricity and water. Member states noted these concerns.

The Commission updated Ministers on implementation of the European Public Prosecutor’s Office (EPPO). The European Council will discuss the proposal to extend the EPPO to cross-border terrorism offences.

The discussion on enhancing mutual trust focused on the importance of mutual recognition, while noting the importance of an independent judiciary and the rule of law. The UK intervened to recognise the mutual benefits of continued co-operation, and the UK’s commitment to the principle of mutual trust. The presidency will prepare conclusions on mutual trust for the December JHA Council.

The Commission presented its communication on securing free and fair European elections, including protection from personal data misuse and cyber incidents.

The Home Secretary attended Interior day.

The Commission set out ambitious plans for a stronger, more effective European Border and Coast Guard Agency (Frontex) including a standing corps of 10,000 officers, which would provide substantial support to member states in protecting the external border. Member states underlined their support for a stronger Frontex, but expressed concerns about the size of the standing corps, its impact on national authorities and the consequences for member state competence on border protection.

The Commission briefly presented the new return directive recast and member states discussed accelerated borders procedures, linking the asylum and returns processes, with asylum claims processed as close to the border as possible and, if refused, the failed asylum seeker returned fast and smoothly. Some member states focused on the need to maximise third-country co-operation on returns and readmission of own nationals. Member states were divided on the mandatory nature of the border procedures. Some member states supported manifestly unfounded claims at the border leading to an entry refusal rather than a returns decision.

Over lunch, Ministers discussed the EU’s comprehensive “whole of route” approach to tackling illegal migration. The Home Secretary focused on strengthening the EU’s response to human traffickers and smugglers advertising online, and boosting our work with African partners on economic development, strategic communications and behavioural insights to prevent migrants from starting dangerous journeys to Europe.

Ministers also discussed the balance between solidarity and responsibility. The presidency, supported by some member states, proposed broadening the idea of “solidarity” to avoid compulsory reallocation of refugees to member states who reject this, but who are content to make substantial contributions to other aspects of migration management, including external partnerships with third countries.

The Council discussed the JHA funding programmes within the next multi-annual financial framework. The UK will not participate in these programmes as a member state. The presidency called on member states to establish a strong steering structure to ensure the optimal use of funds. Member states supported provisions to step up co-operation with third countries on migration, but raised questions around flexibility and allocations to member states.

The presidency updated on progress on the files within the common European asylum system (CEAS) package. The Dublin IV proposal, as it links to the issue of solidarity and burden sharing, will be discussed among leaders at the October European Council.

[HCWS1022]

**LEADER OF THE HOUSE**

Draft Parliamentary Buildings (Restoration and Renewal) Bill

The Leader of the House of Commons (Andrea Leadsom):

Today, the Government publish the Parliamentary Buildings (Restoration and Renewal) Bill in draft, which seeks to establish the statutory bodies that will be responsible for the restoration and renewal works within the parliamentary estate, giving effect to the resolutions passed by Parliament earlier this year. In addition to Parliament having expressed its view in those resolutions, it will also be given an opportunity to vote on the proposed design, cost and timing of the substantive building works relating to the Palace of Westminster. In developing the draft Bill, the Government have worked closely with the House authorities.

The Bill will establish the governance structure within which those bodies will operate. The bodies will have the capacity and capability to make strategic decisions on the restoration and renewal programme, so that the Palace of Westminster can be secured as the UK Parliament for future generations.

The Bill establishes a parliamentary works sponsor body which will have overall responsibility for the programme and act as a single client on behalf of both Houses. It will also form a delivery authority as a company limited by guarantee. The delivery authority will formulate proposals in relation to the restoration works, and ensure their operational delivery. The bodies will be independent and able to operate effectively in the commercial sphere, bringing the expertise and capability needed for a project of this scale. This two-tier approach was used to successfully deliver the London Olympics.

The Bill also establishes a Parliamentary Works Estimates Commission which will lay the sponsor body’s estimates before Parliament, and play a role in reviewing the sponsor body’s expenditure.

The Government agree with Parliament that there can be no blank cheque for this work and it must represent good value for taxpayers’ money. The Bill provides that the sponsor body and the delivery authority must have regard to value for money when exercising their functions throughout the programme. The Treasury will be able to review and comment on the annual estimates for the funding of the programme, and the National Audit Office will be able to undertake audits and value for money reviews. Furthermore, the Estimates Commission will have the power to review, comment on, and in certain circumstances reject those annual estimates.

It is important that the views of parliamentarians on the programme are taken into account. The sponsor body will have a majority of parliamentarians on its
board, alongside external expertise. Parliamentarians will be fully consulted on the strategic direction of the programme. The sponsor body will be required to return to Parliament for approval to make any significant changes to the approved proposals in respect of the Palace. Parliament will also be given an opportunity to vote on the annual expenditure of the sponsor body and the delivery authority through the estimates process.

We welcome the forthcoming scrutiny of the draft Bill, to ensure that it achieves its aims of a restoration and renewal programme that is sufficiently independent, and that is transparent and accountable to Parliament. [HCWS1019]
The petition of residents of Newcastle upon Tyne Central, declares that football is an integral part of Newcastle upon Tyne’s social and cultural wellbeing; notes that fans of Newcastle United are heavily invested both financially and emotionally in the success of the team; further that the current manager Rafa Benitez needs the financial and emotional support of both fans and the club’s owner; further that this support should include investment in players, training facilities and community engagement; and further that the owner Mike Ashley has not made this support forthcoming.

The petitioners therefore request that the House of Commons urge the Government to take action to prevent unscrupulous football club owners from exploiting the clubs, their fans and local communities, with particular reference to Mike Ashley and Newcastle United FC.

And the petitioners remain, etc.—[Presented by Chi Onwurah, Official Report, 24 July 2018; Vol. 645, c. 984.]

Observations from the Under-Secretary of State for Digital, Culture, Media and Sport (Tracey Crouch):

The Government note the petition of 24 July, and make the following observations:

The Government welcome the opportunity to respond to the concerns raised over the ownership of professional football clubs and in particular that of Newcastle United FC, one of our oldest and best supported clubs.

In order to take up a controlling interest in a club, individuals must prior to becoming an owner, and then annually, pass an Owners and Directors test (formerly fit and proper persons). The Test is an assessment of who is legally fit to own a football club. It is based on a set of objective criteria, such as whether an individual is banned from being a company director or has been involved in more than one administration at a football club since 2004.

The football authorities have agreed to keep the Owners and Directors Test under regular review and to listen to supporters’ concerns. This commitment is set out in the Government’s Expert Working Group’s report on Supporter Ownership and Engagement published in early 2016.

The Premier League has additional, wide-ranging rules in the areas of club ownership and finance. Under League rules, the ultimate beneficial owners of all clubs must be publicly disclosed. The full chain of ownership must also be disclosed to the League. Prospective new owners must meet the Premier League Board and provide extensive detail on the sources and sufficiency of funding they have in place.

Clubs must also submit information on the financial structure of any proposed investment, and a business plan demonstrating that all liabilities can be met for at least 12 months ahead; submit independently audited accounts to the Premier League each season; and submit quarterly reports demonstrating they are up to date with PAYE and NI payments to Her Majesty’s Revenues and Customs.

The Government wholeheartedly recognise that football clubs are valuable to their local communities, and the utmost care should be taken by their owners and stakeholders to protect their long-term future. Further, the Government recognise that fans have every right to ask questions of those that run their clubs. It is essential we have healthy football clubs, and owners who care for and respect their tradition and fan base.

The Government have invested significant time over the last few years to find ways to improve supporter engagement beyond the customer relationship, into recognising them as an integral part of clubs’ success. A key recommendation (which is now enshrined in football’s rulebooks) from the Government’s Expert Working Group on football supporter ownership and engagement is that all clubs in the top four divisions must ensure there is open dialogue between club owners/senior executives and their supporter groups on the matters of most importance to the running of the club. These meetings lead the way in ensuring fans are better informed and consulted on club activities, including its financial standing, future plans; and other matters of real importance. The Government believe this structured engagement is helping to build relationships over time.

Turning specifically to Newcastle United FC, the Government are not aware of any failing by the current owners to meet the Premier League’s requirements to ensure facilities are maintained to the required standard, to comply with the financial reporting and ownership criteria rule outlined above, nor the requirement to meet with supporters to discuss matters important to the running of the club. The Government, however, have noted the concern among supporters that has led to this petition and would encourage the ownership of Newcastle United FC to review the way they currently engage with fans to see if more can be achieved in this area.

The Government will continue to hold the football authorities to account for ensuring there are regulations in place that encourage good governance, sustainable investment and ensure there is dialogue with supporters.

Home Education: draft guidance and the consultation

The petition of residents of Brighton Pavilion, declares that the “Home Education—Call for Evidence and revised DfE guidance” has been written following significant consultation with local authorities and no consultation whatsoever with the home education community; further that the consultation is consequently for little more than show as an intention to implement the content has already been stated: further that it seeks to encourage local authorities to breach the ECHR Article 8 and the GDPR; and further that the report provides no accessible means for a parent to address
ultra vires behaviour by their local authority, where many of those authorities already act routinely in an ultra vires manner.

The petitioners therefore request that the House of Commons urges the Government to withdraw the draft guidance and the consultation, until it has put in place an accessible and workable complaints procedure and further has consulted with home educating parents, as it has with Local Authorities, what the contents should include.

And the petitioners remain, etc.—[Presented by Caroline Lucas, Official Report, 12 September 2018; Vol. 646, c. 23P.]

Observations from the Minister for School Standards (Nick Gibb):

The consultation “Home Education—Call for Evidence and revised DfE guidance” closed on 2 July 2018. The relevant documents can be found at: https://consult.education.gov.uk/school-frameworks/home-education-call-for-evidence-and-revised-dfe-a/.

As well as the call for evidence, the consultation includes draft versions of two guidance documents on the current arrangements for home education. These are intended to replace the Department for Education’s current non-statutory guidance for local authorities, which is to be found at: https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/elective-home-education

The Department discussed home education with stakeholders in the normal course of business up to the launch of the consultation on 10 April.

All responses to the consultation will be considered before publishing the finalised guidance documents. At no point has the Department stated an intention to publish them as final versions without revision in the light of responses received to the consultation.

Representations on whether the contents of the two draft guidance documents breach Article 8 of the European Convention on Human Rights (right to private and family life) or the provisions of the General Data Protection Regulation (as embodied into UK law in the Data Protection Act 2018), will be taken into account as we consider responses to the consultation.

The documents in their draft form contain no reference to remedies for behaviour by local authorities. This is because no special provision for this is necessary in respect of home education. The Education Act 1996 already contains general provisions for this purpose relating to local authorities. However, the Department will consider whether the finalised versions of the guidance documents should contain specific information on this.

This Department does not recognise the suggestion that consultation has been flawed or inadequate. Several thousand responses, the majority of which have come from home educating families, have been received, as well as a substantial petition, and there has been considerable opportunity for detailed comment and input from such families. Following the consultation and consideration of the responses, the two guidance documents will be published in the autumn of 2018 in their revised and finalised form. In addition, a formal Government response document analysing responses to the call for evidence, and setting out next steps, will also be published in the autumn of 2018.

HOUSING, COMMUNITIES AND LOCAL GOVERNMENT

Funding cuts to North Lincolnshire Citizens Advice Bureau

The petition of residents of North Lincolnshire,

Declares that the decision of North Lincolnshire Council to cease their core funding for North Lincolnshire Citizens Advice Bureau is putting the long-term future of the Citizens Advice Bureau at risk, and means that service provision will be adversely affected and jobs will be lost at an outstanding organisation which has served the North Lincolnshire community so well for such a long time.

The petitioners therefore request that the House of Commons urges the Government to intervene with North Lincolnshire Council to keep the funding for North Lincolnshire Citizens Advice Bureau.

And the petitioners remain, etc.—[Presented by Nic Dakin, Official Report, 17 July 2018; Vol. 645, c. 374.]

Observations from the Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Housing, Communities and Local Government (Rishi Sunak):

The Government recognise the important role that councils play in helping to support community services, which is why the 2018-19 Local Government finance settlement sees a £1.3 billion increase in resources to Local Government over the next two years.

Our fair and sustainable financial settlement gives local authorities the ability to protect important local services. As democratically elected organisations, local authorities are independent of central Government and are responsible for managing their budgets in line with local priorities.

The Government expect local authorities to take on the challenge of making savings, while continuing to provide a range of high quality services to local communities.

WALES

Park Rangers in Wrexham County Borough Council

The petition of residents of Cefn Mawr in Clwyd South,

Declares that nature parks are an important part of our environmental heritage; further that they provide an area in which residents and visitors can enjoy nature and open spaces and play a vital role in the conversation and protection of nature; and further that local country parks including Ty Mawr Country Park, Nant Mill Country Park and Alyn Waters Country Park are well used by the community and attract visitors to the area, therefore helping to support the local economy.

The petitioners therefore request that the House of Commons urges the Government to urge Wrexham County Borough Council to reverse their decision to
reduce funding for Park Rangers, whose role is vital to the continued existence of unspoilt country parks in Clwyd South constituency.

And the petitioners remain, etc.—[Presented by Susan Elan Jones, Official Report, 18 April 2018; Vol. 639, c. 377.]

Observations from the Secretary of State for Wales (Alun Cairns):

Local government in Wales is the responsibility of the National Assembly for Wales and the Welsh Government. Therefore, it would not be appropriate for the UK Government to comment on this issue.
Ministerial Corrections
Tuesday 9 October 2018

TREASURY

Household Debt
The following is an extract from Treasury Questions on 11 September 2018.

Sir Vince Cable (Twickenham) (LD): British families are currently spending considerably more than their disposable income and, as a consequence, debt levels in relation to income are rising back to crisis levels. At the same time, France and Germany have big savings surpluses. Which is the most sustainable of the two options?

John Glen: What is sustainable is that real household disposable income is up by 4.6% since 2010. I acknowledge that there are those who are experiencing challenges, and that is why I have set out the measures the Government are taking and are determined to take to assist those in a vulnerable position.


Letter of correction from the Economic Secretary to the Treasury, the hon. Member for Salisbury (John Glen):

An error has been identified in the response I gave to the right hon. Member for Twickenham (Sir Vince Cable).

The correct response should have been:

John Glen: What is sustainable is that real household disposable income is up by 3.4% since 2010. I acknowledge that there are those who are experiencing challenges, and that is why I have set out the measures the Government are taking and are determined to take to assist those in a vulnerable position.


WORK AND PENSIONS

Defined-benefit Pension Schemes
The following is an extract from a debate in Westminster Hall on Defined-benefit Pension Schemes on 10 July 2018.

Guy Opperman: For the avoidance of doubt among everyone reading the debate, the PPF compensation scheme ensures that individuals initially receive at least 90% of their pension benefits.


Letter of correction from the Under-Secretary of State for Work and Pensions, the hon. Member for Hexham (Guy Opperman):

An error has been identified in my response to the debate. The correct wording should have been:

Guy Opperman: For the avoidance of doubt among everyone reading the debate, the PPF compensation scheme ensures that individuals initially receive at least 90% of their pension benefits, subject to an overall cap.

WOMEN AND EQUALITIES

Topical Questions
The following is an extract from Women and Equalities Topical Questions on Thursday 13 September 2018.

T5. [906885] Patricia Gibson (North Ayrshire and Arran) (SNP): It is extremely important that the injustice suffered by the WASPI women is not allowed to slip off the political agenda, because many women in my constituency are suffering terribly as a result. Will the Minister stand up for women and commit today to urging the Chancellor to put in place transitional arrangements at the autumn Budget?

Sarah Newton: The hon. Lady will be aware that £1.1 billion of concessions have been made, and it is really important to note that as a result of our reforms, more than 3 million more women will receive £550 a year more by 2030.


Letter of correction from the Minister for Disabled People, Health and Work, the hon. Member for Truro and Falmouth (Sarah Newton):

An error has been identified in the response I gave to the hon. Member for North Ayrshire and Arran (Patricia Gibson).

The correct response should have been:

T5. [906885] Patricia Gibson (North Ayrshire and Arran) (SNP): It is extremely important that the injustice suffered by the WASPI women is not allowed to slip off the political agenda, because many women in my constituency are suffering terribly as a result. Will the Minister stand up for women and commit today to urging the Chancellor to put in place transitional arrangements at the autumn Budget?

Sarah Newton: The hon. Lady will be aware that £1.1 billion of concessions have been made, and it is really important to note that as a result of our reforms, more than 3 million women will receive on average £550 a year more by 2030.
Ministerial Corrections

Thursday 11 October 2018

DIGITAL, CULTURE, MEDIA AND SPORT

Listed Sporting Events
The following is an extract from the Westminster Hall debate on Listed Sporting Events on 11 July 2018.

Margot James: Our public service broadcasters spent £515 million on sport last year, delivering just over 3,000 hours of content; only factual programmes have more money invested in them. They contribute a huge amount to grassroots sport, with more than half a billion pounds flowing from broadcasters to national governing bodies, which helps sports to increase their grassroots appeal and gives children the opportunity to try new sports when otherwise they might not have been able to do so.


Letter of correction from the Minister for Digital and the Creative Industries:
An error has been identified in the response I gave to the hon. Member for Keighley (John Grogan) during the Westminster Hall debate on Listed Sporting Events.
The correct response should have been:

Margot James: Our public service broadcasters spent £515 million on sport in 2016, delivering just over 3,000 hours of content; only factual programmes have more money invested in them. They contribute a huge amount to grassroots sport, with more than half a billion pounds flowing from broadcasters to national governing bodies, which helps sports to increase their grassroots appeal and gives children the opportunity to try new sports when otherwise they might not have been able to do so.


HEALTH AND SOCIAL CARE
Care Homes: CCTV
The following are extracts from a Westminster Hall debate on Care Homes: CCTV on 5 September 2018:

The Minister for Care (Caroline Dinenage): We also expect those providing the service, local authorities and the Care Quality Commission to take swift action where anyone alleges poor care, neglect or abuse. We have backed that up with more than £9 billion of investment in the sector in the past three years, which equates to an 8% increase in funding. That incredible amount of money highlights the challenge we face in the sector.


Letter of correction from Caroline Dinenage:
An error has been identified during the speech I gave on Care Homes: CCTV.
The correct statement should have been:

Caroline Dinenage: We have backed that up with more than £9 billion of investment in the sector over three years, which equates to an 8% increase in funding.


Letter of correction from Caroline Dinenage:
An error has been identified during the speech I gave on Care Homes: CCTV.
The correct statement should have been:

Caroline Dinenage: Over three years, we are increasing funding by £9.4 billion, which equates to an 8% increase.
Ministerial Corrections

Monday 15 October 2018

TRANSPORT

Road Transport Emissions

The following is an extract from Questions to the Secretary State for Transport on 11 October 2018.

Andy McDonald: The reality is that the policies of this Government have directly increased harmful emissions from road transport. Bus funding has been slashed, plug-in car grants cut, and there is chaos in the transition to electric motor vehicles and trains. Will the Secretary of State wake up and accept that he cannot continue to crawl along in the slow lane when it comes to tackling climate change?

Jesse Norman: I apologise for being the same person that I was when I answered the previous question and not the Secretary of State, but let me pick up on the hon. Gentleman’s points. In August, one in 12 new vehicles was electric, and that is because electric vehicles are beginning a fast S-curve of take-up. They have been heavily supported by this Government, and they will continue to be so supported.

TRANSPORT

Careers at Sea

The following is an extract from Questions to the Secretary State for Transport on 11 October 2018.

Karl Turner: It is scandalous that British officers and ratings hold fewer than 20% of jobs on UK vessels, while the shipping companies reap the benefits from the tonnage tax. Does the Minister agree that we need to create a mandatory link to training and employment of British seafarers, including ratings, as other EU countries have?

Ms Ghani: The tonnage tax enables us to have six types of apprenticeship, and it encourages companies to employ UK ratings as well. We are doing everything we can, whether it is on ports or working with our ship owners, to ensure that every opportunity is available for young people to enter the maritime sector as a career.

Letter of correction from the Under-Secretary of State for Transport, the hon. Member for Hereford and South Herefordshire (Jesse Norman): An error has been identified in the response I gave to the hon. Member for Kingston upon Hull East (Karl Turner):

The correct response should have been:

Jesse Norman: I apologise for being the same person that I was when I answered the previous question and not the Secretary of State, but let me pick up on the hon. Gentleman’s points. In August, one in 12 new vehicles was electric, and that is because electric vehicles are beginning a fast S-curve of take-up. They have been heavily supported by this Government, and they will continue to be so supported.

Letter of correction from the Under-Secretary of State for Transport, the hon. Member for Wealden (Ms Ghani): An error has been identified in the response I gave to the hon. Member for Middlesbrough (Andy McDonald):

The correct response should have been:

Ms Ghani: The tonnage tax enables and encourages companies to train UK ratings as well. We are doing everything we can, whether it is on ports or working with our ship owners, to ensure that every opportunity is available for young people to enter the maritime sector as a career.
Ministerial Correction

Tuesday 16 October 2018

EDUCATION

Nursery Sector: Sustainability

The following is an extract from the Westminster Hall debate on Nursery Sector: Sustainability on 10 October 2018.

Nadhim Zahawi: I also remind hon. Members that childcare providers do not have to offer the free 30 hours—that is entirely up to them—although, since the roll-out of 30 hours of free childcare, we have seen a sizeable majority of providers increasing the number of free hours available to parents, with no evidence of an impact on their funding. [Official Report, 10 October 2018, Vol. 647, c. 102WH.]

Letter of correction from the Under-Secretary of State for Education, the hon. Member for Stratford-on-Avon (Nadhim Zahawi):

An error has been identified in my contribution to the Westminster Hall debate on Nursery Sector: Sustainability.

The correct contribution should have been:

Nadhim Zahawi: I also remind hon. Members that childcare providers do not have to offer the free 30 hours—that is entirely up to them—although, since the roll-out of 30 hours of free childcare, we have seen a sizeable majority of providers increasing the number of free hours available to parents, with no evidence of an impact on other funded provision.
Ministerial Correction

Thursday 18 October 2018

WORK AND PENSIONS
Topical Questions

The following is an extract from topical questions to the Secretary of State for Work and Pensions on 15 October 2018.

T7. [907067] Michael Tomlinson: I welcome the announcement that the Department is providing work experience, and working with Barnardo’s to provide work experience, for care leavers. What further support is my hon. Friend offering to care leavers to ensure they fulfil their potential?

Justin Tomlinson: This is a real priority for our Secretary of State and it will involve building on our work to enable care leavers to make advanced UC claims, access to the youth application support programme, early access to the work and health programme and extensions to second chance learning, and we will work with employers to create more opportunities to build on this partnership with Barnardo’s.


Letter of correction from the Under-Secretary of State for Work and Pensions, the hon. Member for North Swindon (Justin Tomlinson):

An error has been identified in the response I gave to my hon. Friend the Member for Mid Dorset and North Poole (Michael Tomlinson) during topical questions.

The correct response should have been:

Justin Tomlinson: This is a real priority for our Secretary of State and it will involve building on our work to enable care leavers to make advanced UC claims, access to the youth application support programme, early access to the work and health programme and exemptions for second chance learning, and we will work with employers to create more opportunities to build on this partnership with Barnardo’s.